

Environment and Sustainable Development in India: Through the Lens of Gender

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Abstract

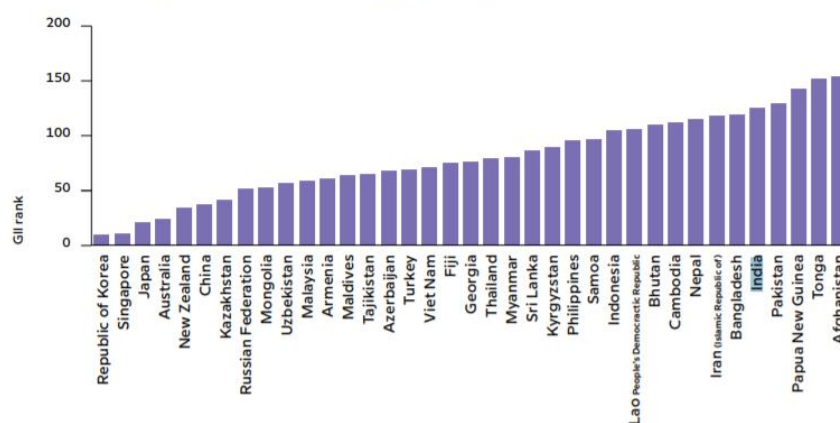
The environment is the fundamental resource and while we would expect it to affect all those who interact with it similarly, we find that it isn't the case. Gender and social norms often dictate how one interacts with their environment and how they are impacted by the environment in return. Further, it has been observed that social class, caste, sexual identity, religion, age and other social variables also have a bearing on how one engages with their environment. It is proposed to investigate the links between Gender and Environment, how the disparity across gendered identities can possibly hinder development and how the situation can be remedied to adopt a more sustainable approach to development, whilst empowering women. In order to look into the link between environment and gender, the analytical framework developed by Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (Protecting the environment: Why a gender perspective matters (2015)) can be adopted and moulded to fit region specific requirements. The study will draw from existing epistemology relating to Ecofeminism, feminist environmentalism, historical movements and current practices, with special focus on the Indian Subcontinent.

Introduction

Gender permeates through and affects all aspect of an individual's life. From the clothes they wear to the work they do to the expectations societies makes of them, everything is based on the social activity of performing gender. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that gender also influences the relationship of an individual with the environment.

It is undeniable that people all around the world change the environment by their actions, and in turn, are acted upon by it. Environmental degradation and its impact is a process riddled with inequality because those who are most responsible for environment destruction seldom bear the brunt of it. It has been observed as a global phenomenon that women are more vulnerable to forces of nature than men, simply because they continue to be overrepresented in the poorest population and those communities which depend on their immediate environment for survival. Adding on to these factors, the inequalities that arise from the process of gendering exacerbate the burden of ecological changes on women.

Gender Inequality Index rank of ESCAP member States, 2015



Source: ESCAP, based on UNDP Human Development Database; see <http://hdr.undp.org/en/data> (accessed 3 August 2017).

India ranked 125th in terms of Gender Inequality in a report by UNDP Human Development Database in 2017, emerging as one of the poorest performers. As stated in UN's Women and Climate Change Fact Sheet, women possess a strong body of knowledge of the environment,

climate change mitigation
and adaptation strategies.

As most of them are
responsible for managing

natural and household

resources, they should be

at the forefront of

dictating how the resources can be judiciously used. However, the gender inequality

prevalent in the country, and the world over, prevents the knowledge to be put to use and

despite being the closest to nature, women are often the furthest away when it comes to

decision making.

Understanding Differences in Linkages to Environment

In order to understand the differences between the relationship men and women share with
the environment, one can employ the analytical framework presented by Swedish Society for

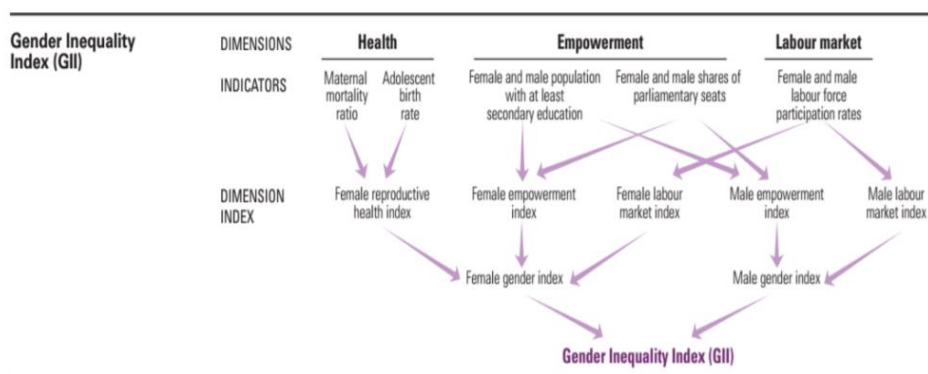
Nature Conservation in Protecting the environment: Why a gender perspective matters

(2015). A gendered analysis of relationship

between the environment and individuals can be

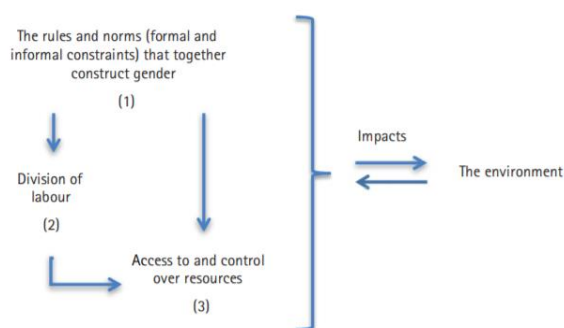
done under the following headings:

- **Formal and Informal Constraints:** The rules, both informally accepted and formally enforced, that inform the construction of social gender
- **Division of Labour:** Segregation of task assigned to men and women based on prevalent social norms



Source: UNDP-HDI Indices and Indicators: 2018 Statistical Update

Figure 1. The analytical gender framework



- Access to and control over resources: The division in terms of which resources are accessible to individuals based on their gender and the extent to which they wield control over them

The aforementioned parameters serve to highlight the social conditions which dictate the extent of one's use of and dependence on natural resources for sustenance. While formal laws in several countries promote non-discriminatory practices between men and women, informal constraints (cultural and social norms, values and traditions) often override the formal rules. In some cases, formal laws also reinforce gender inequality, such as in the case of a community-based forest management program in Philippines. Only the male members of the community were provided with certificates and land titles, thereby further sidelining women, overshadowing their contribution to the community and reinforcing gender inequality (reported by WRM, 2005). In the Indian context, such constraints also exist because of systematic class and caste hierarchies and rampant patriarchal notions.

Gender based division of labour ensures that women's work is limited to the private sphere while men are enabled to go out and work in the public sphere. The strictly marked division of labour, along with formal and informal constraints, also dictates the access men and women have to shared resources. Usually, women are rendered in a position that makes them dependent on their male family members, leaves them with less to no control over resources and effectively removes them from decision making roles.

Therefore, when lobbying for a more equitable distribution of resources, it is important to analyse who is going to decide how to use the resources. When women are removed from the driving seat, they are unable to implement the knowledge they have of using the resources in more sustainable ways.

The Fisheries and Women Vendors of Bombay

The following case study was published in *Protecting the environment: Why a gender perspective matters* (2015) and highlights the different ways in which a person's relationship with environment differs, based on their gender, how women are the vulnerable group and takes as an example the women of the fishing community in Mumbai, India.

Over the decade, contribution of fisheries to the GDP of India has increased, from 0.75 million tons in 1950-51 to 9.5 million tons in 2012-13 (FAO). Along with the increase in production, a number of changes have occurred in the method of production. The most prominent change that can be observed is that the fishing industry has moved from being a strictly sustenance activity to a full-fledged, ever-expanding industry (Kumar, A., et al., 2003, Dastagiri, M. B. and Mruthyunjaya, 2003, Katiha, P. K., et al., 2003). Secondly, it has come to be dominated by inland fisheries as opposed to the dominance of marine fisheries in the yester years.

The industry is important in terms of the almost 14.5 million (FAO) people's that depend on it for fulfilling their food and nutritional needs. Among them, prominent is the Koli community whose traditional profession has been fishing and selling fish with almost 48.5% of them being women (Ibid). From collecting the fish from the harbour to selling them in the market, these women are involved at all stages of the production process. Even though the population of women is almost half of the community, they don't reap equal benefits from the profession.

As they move across the city for selling fish, the activity is associated with high cost. Thus, in times of low production, the women are forced to sit at home with little to no income in hand. Even on days they go for selling, the income is low and they rarely have proper meals, except for in the evening, thus leading to malnutrition and other health issues.

Owing to wide spread illiteracy within the women of the community, according to Peke (2012) they turn to fishing co-operatives for loans, seldom entering into formal payment contracts. Instead, they sell their jewellerys (bought as a form of saving) in times of financial need, thereby exposing themselves to prolonged poverty. In fact, according to International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) women mainly rely on informal loans while “Loans through cooperatives to women is very rare on contrary men get all the loans and subsidies through fisheries cooperatives for their fish harvest activities”.

Furthermore, women are rarely part of collectives themselves. The oldest co-operatives in Maharashtra, the Satpati Fishermen’s Sarvodaya Sahakari Society, has a total of 3,650 members, with only 450 of them being women. The overrepresentation of men in the co-operatives ensures their dominance, which leads to less support from the co-operation to women. According to Peke (2012), existing prejudices against women as being “quarrelsome” partly prevents them from being a part of such groups, coupled with the dual burden of being workers as well as caretakers. Male dominance also puts the reins of price fixing in the market in their hands, which adds on to the exclusion of women.

Adding on to their woes, urbanization in Mumbai and near coastal areas has had a damaging effect on marine life, with the city authorities often discouraging people to consume sea food. This leaves the women with little income and unlike the men, they have limited financial resources to sustain themselves. On a larger level, policy makers, while introducing welfare schemes and development programs for the community, fail to take into account the interests of women, further alienating them. While some women have started co-operative societies of their own, they still don’t wield as much control over the market as already established co-operatives do.

The case study illustrates how one can assess the relationship of gender with environment using the analytical framework. It illustrated how formal and informal constraints such as cultural traditions, prejudices, market regulations, etc, affect men and women differently. Owing to the stringent division of gender based labor and restricted access to and control over resources, natural, social and financial, women suffer the most. With ever increasing pollution and environment degradation, the lives of women of the Koli community worsen more and more.

Sustainable Development and Role of Women

Sustainable development has been defined as, “development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. The United Nations has adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) (2016-2030) which are to be achieved in the span of 15 years. It can be rightly said that at the heart of these goals is the spirit of inclusion. Out of the 17 SDGs, only one, the 5th Goal, directly addresses the issue of gender equality however, it is pertinent to the success of all 17 goals. Inter generational equity can only be achieved if we work towards gender equality in the present.

Development without accounting for half the section of the society is no development at all. First of all, it is a matter of morals and ethics, and it’s high time that our notion of development become just and equitable. Secondly, the disparity in shouldering the burden on environmental change has always been experienced more by women, as they intersect in large numbers with the world’s poorest, given the lack of social, physical, human and financial capital. It is imperative that women are given agency, only then can the project of sustainable development be termed as successful.

In order to do so, we need to move from looking at gender inequality solely as a socio-cultural issue to shifting the lens and perceiving it as an environmental issue as well. Despite

being dominantly involved in activities which directly relate to the environment, such as agriculture, fetching water, wood collection for fuel, etc, their representation in decision making bodies is minimal and very few of them are landholders. In India, women accounted for 37% of rural council members in 2010. At the international level, women are still underrepresented in environment-related negotiations. In such a scenario, the need for greater local governance and decentralisation arises, along with various forms of affirmative action to ensure participation and representation.

However, empowering women is a multifaceted process. Simply putting them on a decision making platform will not make much of a change. If their agency has to be built, they need to gain complete access of their life and the choices they make. This would include working towards removing the formal and informal constraints, rejecting gendered division of labour and providing them with access to resources. If India has to achieve the SDGs by 2030 and protect its environment, moving towards become a more gender-equal nation will be the first step.

Conclusion

The paper discusses how an individual's relationship with their environment differs based on their gender. Further, it attempts to demonstrate the same by citing as an example the life and challenges faced by the women of the Koli community of Mumbai. The gender analytics framework given by the Swedish Society of Nature Conservation has been employed in the case study and can be used to analyse gender based equation in other settings as well. It has

Table 4
Women's representation in environmental bodies globally, as of August 2015

ORGANIZATION OR INSTITUTION	FEMALE REPRESENTATION (%)
Nationally elected Green Party leaders	48
Rio Convention NGO representatives	47
Rio Convention government delegates	33
Convention on Biological Diversity (government delegates, bureau members, NGO representatives)	43
United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (government delegates, bureau members, NGO representatives)	30
United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (government delegates, bureau members, NGO representatives)	36
National focal points with the Global Environmental Facility	29
Focal points for the United Nations Forum on Forests	24
Focal points for Rio Conventions and the Global Environmental Facility	18
Heads of national environmental-sector ministries or departments	12
World Energy Council Secretaries	18
World Energy Council chairs	4

Source: ESCAP, based on IUCN Environment Gender Index Factsheet, 2015; see www.portals.iucn.org/union/sites/union/files/doc/egi_factsheet_decision_making_web_sept2015.pdf (accessed 29 July 2017).

also been argued that gender equality is integral to sustainable development. The SDGs, which India has pledged to achieve by 2030, can only be achieved once India empowers its women.

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