WOMEN AND ENVIRONMENT: THE MISSING LINK IN INDIA'S ENVIRONMENT POLICY LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT

A large and growing body of policymakers, development professionals and academicians in India have been resonating the need for gender inclusive framework supported by indigenous and traditional forms of knowledge to spearhead India's environment policies. In this paper, I will look at the philosophical underpinnings, their critiques and relevance in present environment landscape of India. I will further try to contextualise the learnings from women led environment movements to understand key enablers and obstacles in the way of achieving gender parity. The findings suggest that country's environment policies and action remain gender blind except for Joint Forest Management Programme and National Forest Policy of 1988. While these policies do entail gender component in their design, the policies fail to engage women during implementation and evaluation stage. There is no gender disaggregated data available to ascertain women's participation in these Joint Forest Management Committees and Biodiversity Management Committees that can guide real-time measures and policy reforms. The paper also highlights key insights that may guide the policymakers in designing, implementing, and evaluating gender inclusive environment policies in India.

KEYWORDS

Ecofeminism, Feminist Political Ecology (FPE), Mahila Mandal Dals, Village Committees, Van Panchayats, Joint Forest Management

1. INTRODUCTION

At COP26 climate summit, leaders of Estonia, Tanzania and Bangladesh called for countries to support women leadership in climate action across international, national, and local levels of society (30). With a global average of 25 % women in parliament, gender-parity in national level environmental decision making is far from reality. Although women representation in government delegations for climate action has improved, UNFCCC research reports that the participation remains dominated by men only (men spoke 74% of the time in plenary meetings between May and June last year) (22).

It is evident from Oxfam's Climate Finance Shadow Report 2020 that incorporation of gender components into climate finance remains limited. The study shows that only an estimated 1.5% of climate-related ODA identified gender equality as a primary objective, and 34% identified gender equality as an important but not principal objective. A remaining 64% of projects either determined that gender equality was not a significant objective (33%) or were not screened (32% not marked) (7).

Nationally, India's environmental policies, laws and regulations lack gender-specific provisions where nominal representation of women is evident. Forest Rights Act mandates for one-third women membership, access to joint land titles for women and recognition of women's land

claims in single headed households. However, there is plethora of evidence that shows that these measures have hardly been able to address the issues pertaining to inequity, low participation, agency, and long-term effective participation in decision-making.

Liane Schalatek, Associate director of Heinrich Böll Stiftung Washington, DC and author of Gender and Climate Finance, a 2020 report published by Climate Funds Update, calls this a "shocking indictment", reflecting a disregard by climate funds and implementing agencies for "women's knowledge about the needs and climate impacts on their communities and the localised solutions that they have to offer".

The current scenario on gender responsive climate action highlights the need to advocate for genderparity in national, state, and local environmental policies, laws, and regulations with improved emphasis on localised solutions. The objective of this study is to present a feminist assessment of environment action in India by i) reflecting and revising the learnings from the philosophy of gender and environment debate, ii) situating women in the history of ecological struggles, iii) highlighting enabling and hindering factors in achieving gender parity iv) assessing country's environment landscape through feminist evaluation and v) re-conceptualizing the themes/areas for environment action in India.

2. GENDER AND ENVIRONMENT: REFLECTIONS AND REVISIONS

To understand the linkages between gender and the environment, the paper attempts to analyse the issue by using gender analysis framework developed by the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (12). The framework lays down three broad areas for analysis which are a.) formal and informal constraints (rules and norms that shape the behaviour of actors in gender relations, b.) division of labour between men and women and c.) access to resources (land resources, control over resources and benefits derived from the utilization of resources)[i].

The scholarship around women's special relationship with environment has been around us for over five decades; with debates starting from women's innate relationship with nature and co-relation between oppression of women by men in a patriarchal society and nature by capitalist society (cultural eco-feminism) to material conceptions of gender-environment relationships. Many fields within the gender-environment universe have come up, majorly as response to the conceptual connections, historical connections, and spiritual connections established between women and nature by eco-feminist theories of 70s.

21st century debates are dominated by largely materially focused debates i.e., situating women's material reality with respect to their class, caste, gender, race, and ethnicity, making the old debates around feminine aspects of environment and masculine aspects of destruction, hold a much inferior position.

While the concept of essentialism has not become completely redundant as I will elaborate further in the text, it is important to understand the classification of scholarships within the gender-environment debate.

Sonalini Sapra in her work, Feminist Perspective on the Environment (26), categorizes the scholarship into two main groups. The "eco-feminist" and "materialist"; where the first group is primarily driven by dualistic ideas of women being aligned with nature and men with culture (21), that women's oppression in a patriarchal society is equivalent to nature's oppression in a capitalist society (27) while the second takes oppression of women rooted in structural and material inequalities at the centre. The materialist groups find further extension to its scholarship

with two emerging approaches i.e., Feminist Environmentalism and Feminist Political Ecology (FPE).

While feminist environmentalism focuses on the material reality and the relation between women and nature where factors such as gender, class, caste, race, production, reproduction, and distribution influence this relationship, FPE focuses on gendered knowledge, gendered environmental rights and responsibilities, gendered environmental politics and grassroot activism (9).

In India, the fields of eco-feminism and feminist environmentalism have had major contribution from the seminal works of Dr. Vandana Shiva and Dr. Bina Aggarwal respectively. Shiva holds "modern development" or "western idea of development" responsible for destruction of nature and oppression of women as exploitation and oppression is innate to its structure. The violence to nature is associated with violence to women who depend on nature for the sustenance of their families and communities. She argues that "western idea of development", or "modernity" is not universal and humanly inclusive as they are understood to be, and proposes an alternative epicentre of modernity i.e., the third world, which is feminist, diverse and non-violent in nature.

"These oppositional categories are simultaneously ecological and feminist: they allow the possibility of survival by exposing the parochial basis of science and development and by showing how ecological destruction and the marginalisation of women are not inevitable, economically or scientifically." – Vandana Shiva, Staying Alive

Shiva gives Indian cosmology a vital role in supporting her claim of nature as a feminine principle; that unlike western view where man and nature are in a dichotomous relationship, in Indian cosmology man and nature (Purusha-Prakriti) are in harmony or unity.

She further backs her theory by factoring Mies' proposition that women's interaction with their internal nature and the nature around them in reciprocal, women's appropriation of nature is not a relationship of dominance or control but of cooperation and thus, as producers of an "off-spring" they became the producers of social production and social relations.

Shiva regards the "devaluation" and "de-recognition" of nature's and women's contribution to reproduction of life and thus to productive economy as key causes for ecological crisis and gender inequality.

While Shiva's work is seen as a significant contribution to the scholarship and bringing third world perspectives at the forefront, her work faces the limitation of running into binaries of modern vs traditional, orient vs occident, women vs men which according to many researchers limits the scope for "collaboration" and "cooperation" in the global scenario. Furthermore, her theory takes women as a homogenous category and does not attempt to document their experiences accruing from their caste, class, ethnicities, and religious positions.

Agarwal on the other hand is critical of Shiva's and other eco-feminists' proposition that domination of women and domination of environment happened simultaneously especially with the advent of Scientific Revolution and Colonialism. Agarwal argues that the ecofeminist theories do not take precolonial history into account before establishing the linkage between women and environment. She argues that the position of women with respect to their rights and entitlement has remained more or less same in pre-colonial and post-colonial era. Furthermore, she criticises the eco-feminist framework of giving women the charge of environment conservation. She draws examples from various tribal belts of India where women are already overloaded with the domestic work, receiving negligible institutional and household support. In

such scenario, putting the onus of environmental conservation on women only accentuates the overload that they already face.

Agarwal postulates a rather "material" linkage between women and environment, i.e., that women are at the receiving end of environment degradation because of their relatively greater dependence than men on the natural resources arising from systemic and structural inequalities and lack of access to private property resources. She illustrates this with giving the example of ownership of agricultural land and associated production technology concentrated in the hands of men only. The disadvantages that the women face in rural economy further alienates them from acquiring skills, accessing employment opportunities leading to lower occupational mobility and wages. In the absence of higher or medium levels of training, they are bound to be confined to agriculture works with meagre wages only.

Agarwal's alternative framework has been received positively by the scholars as it does not attempt to homogenise the women in the developing countries, rather it contextualizes their experiences basis their historical, cultural, and social positions in the society.

While reviewing the philosophical approaches and frameworks, it becomes pertinent to make sense of these in the present-day context. How do we make sense of these theories and what future do they hold for the environment policy frameworks of India?

While Shiva is critiqued for bringing religious underpinnings to the gender and environment debates as the scholars argue that these cosmological analogies cannot be universalized. However, in the context of India, same does not hold true. The social fabric of the Indian subcontinent cannot be compared with any sub-continent or continents as the south Asian nations share a common historical, cultural, and social ethos.

Religion and religio- political forces play a vital role in today's domestic politics of many countries which is nowhere more evident than in post-colonial nations of South-Asia (24). In India, multiple flagship programmes implemented by India have taken religious references to create awareness around issues of hygiene, sanitation, environment conservation, etc. For example, PM addressed the nation with the call to respect, conserve and protect the national river Ganga which is among one of the holy rivers for the Hindu community of India through its "Namami Gange Programme" launched in 2014. Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, another one of the most successful schemes implemented by Government of India popularised the slogan "Pehle shauchalaya, phir devalaya" to emphasise on the importance of sanitation.
Under such context, Shiva's cosmological references cannot be completely denied as she attempts to leverage the existing vernacular knowledge to create consciousness towards environment. Although her references cannot be universalised as they do not make much sense to the nations outside the subcontinent, but that should not limit environment experts and policy makers in India from adopting the same in their knowledge systems. Religion is a key driving force in Indian politics and society; it makes more sense to use the existing knowledge system to create awareness and consciousness among masses towards environment conservation and protection instead of attempting to introduce new knowledge paradigm which is alien to the sub-continent.

Similarly, Agarwal's work provides more relevant insights on division of labour as she is writing in a post-globalization era where not all women have equal stake in the environmental protection and not only women have the stake in environmental protection unlike Shiva's proposition. By placing women as the flagbearers of environmental protection just because of their gender

identity, Shiva's proposition reinforces the gender norms in a patriarchal society which defeats the very idea of gender equity proposed by eco-feminists in the first place.

Rural men too have actively responded to severe deforestation and the degradation of village commons by seeking to contain and reverse these processes (3). While women's responses are more linked to availability of resources such as fuel, fodder, non-timber products, depletion of which will lead to undertaking longer journeys and hours of work, men on the other hand respond against the threat to their livelihood which is dependent on accessing village commons for additional income.

3. WOMEN AT THE FOREFRONT OF ECOLOGICAL STRUGGLES

Women in India have led majority of the ecological struggles, their movements have paved way for a politics which transcends gender, promotes diversity, and shows that there is enough space for all to coexist. Women are at the receiving end of the ecological crisis on one hand, on the other, they are creating new intellectual paradigms. Women as victims of the crisis use their experiences to respond to the crisis by contributing to the knowledge repository. The alternatives shown by women do not isolate the 'productivity', 'yield' or 'economic value' from the ecosystem, rather approach it operating in an integrated ecosystem for multipurpose utilization (27).

The reported struggles of women for environmental protection are rooted in 18th Century with the movement led by Bishnoi community of Rajasthan against the cutting of Khejri trees. The tactics of Chipko Movement (1973) in Garhwal region were derived from the practice of 'hugging trees' by the Bishnoi community. From Rajasthan to Garhwal region (present state Uttarakhand), the philosophy of Bishnoi movement has reached to Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka (Appiko Movement, 1983), Kerala (Silent Valley Movement, 1976), Orissa and to the Central Indian highlands (Narmada Bachao Andolan, 1985).

There are numerous success stories where women have led the charge for protection of their village commons, right from People's Education and Development Organization's work in Rajasthan where women in villages have employed watchmen to guard the plantations, in Gujarat where women representation in FPCs is more than 50% to West Bengal's Bankura district where women undertake majority of the protection work.
The Mahila Mandal Dals in Nainital have devised their own rules for the collection of the forest produce and report any form of infractions to the village panchayat heads. Mahila Mandal Dals across the states have been operational for years which have robust management system and contribute to crucial decisions at the village level.

During the 1980s, institutions such as Van Panchayats (established in 1930s) were revived and Mahila Mandals were formed; these institutions acted as protection groups for their respective villages/communities against the informal expansion during late 80s. It was result of these protection groups that in 1990, central government mandated the involvement of Village Communities (VCs) in its national policy.

During the same time, internationally, the 1992 Rio Earth Summit (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, UNCED) was supported by proactive women activists who ensured both within the final Rio Declaration and throughout Agenda 21, the statement of principles and policy proposals issued at the end of the conference (3).

The participation of women in forest protection and management has not only paved way for informal institutions where knowledge sharing among the community members can take place but also have opened avenues for environmental experts to navigate addition of new themes/tools/methods/practices in the area of forest management (20).

For example, the practice of lopping the trees by women are proved to increase the forest density and fodder productivity of the forest. As a result of lopping, the leaves become soft and palatable which upon mixing with dried grasses are fed to cattle through autumn to spring. However, lopping is still not seen as a forest management strategy for using tree produce while conserving the trees. In this regard, knowledge shared by women does not only add to the present scholarship but also demands a reflective inquiry on what can be deemed 'waste', 'rubbish' and 'dispensable'. Additionally, research shows that women's preferences for plant species are more contextual and related to their day to day lives. Women's inclusion in decision making on local silviculture practices becomes more important than before to ensure effective forest management and maximum beneficiary outreach.

4. CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN WOMEN PARTICIPATION

The history of ecological struggles in India has witnessed feminist alternatives to environment conservation, however, women are still excluded from the larger environment policy narrative at the national and state level. Broadly, constraints with regards to effective women participation in environment policies and decision making have been categorized into five categories, i.e., formal rules/policies governing membership; traditional norms of membership in public bodies; social barriers; logistical factors; and the attitudes or perception of the implementing bodies (Agarwal, Environmental Action, Gender Equity and Women's Participation 1997).

While gender disaggregated data is not available on JFMC participation, a 2011 study published by MoEF&CC shows that total 1.45 crore families are covered under JFMCs. Studies on women participation in JFMCs show that women's low attendance and participation in JFMCs/ECs is also limited by their lack of exposure to speaking in public spheres, illiteracy, or absence of fellow women members. Further, they face logistical constraints and double work burdens such as timing of meetings (early morning women are busy with household work and in the evening, women do not prefer to step of the homes due to cultural barriers) and heavy work load (childcare, domestic chores, agricultural activities, etc.) which withdraws women from playing active role in their village's committees. Despite JFMC/EC guidelines in place which provide scope for representation of women and SC/ST communities, most of the time women never make it to these committee meetings leading to lack of representation of their issues and solutions they offer.

When we step outside these JFMCs, the surrounding ecosystem does not present an encouraging picture either. Using ICRISAT's longitudinal data (2009-2014) for nine states, Bina Agarwal analysed intergender and intra-gender land ownership in India. It was found that despite revisions in inheritance laws, just 8.4 % of all females owned land, averaged across states (Bina Agarwal 2021). As per the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) conducted by Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation in 2019-20, the estimated annual female Labour Force Participation rate (LFPR), for age 15 years and above stands at as low as 30% (Female Labour Force Participation 2022). For rural, female LFPR stands at 27.7%, while urban women participation rate is at 18.6%. These rates are further skewed towards unorganized sector; however, gender disaggregated data is not available. Low FLFPR is further reflected in the number of forest department personnel across the states. State level studies conducted in Haryana, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal show that participation rate of women forestry workers

stands somewhere around 5-6% only. In majority of the departments, women are rarely consulted during development of village level micro plans, and it is only male members who are often called to meetings

(20). Women's low participation in environment protection initiatives further limits them from accessing entitlements, efficiency, and empowerment.

5. WOMEN AND INDIA'S ENVIRONMENT POLICY LANDSCAPE

In 2022-23, the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change has been allocated INR 3,030 crore, which is just .076% of the total union government budget of 2022-23. There is rarely any evidence of engaging women in environment conservation in recent environment policies with exception of National Forest Policy of 1988 and Joint Forest Management Programme.

National Forest Policy 1988 and Joint Forest Management (JFM) program (1990, 2000, 2002) mandated participation of local people, especially women in designing and implementing measures for environment stability. JFM programme introduced 50% women participation in JFMCs and 30% participation in ECs. The second round of JFM guidelines released in 2000 focused on contextualised village level micro plans developed with the consultation of local institutions. Biodiversity Act of 2002 also mandated for 1/3rd participation of women in Biodiversity Management Committees (BMCs), with 2.76 lakh BMCs (2021-22) currently operational in the country, however in the absence of gender disaggregated data, efficiency, and effectiveness of these BMCs in ensuring women representation and participation cannot be ascertained.

In 2006, the National Environmental Policy was released which acts as framework for the all the policies that have since followed. While it laid out several guidelines on enhancing and conserving environmental resources; it mentions women's participation with only respect to National Forest Policy and JFM. In National Water Policy (1987,2002, 2012) incorporation of women in the planning, provisioning, and management of water resources continues to be disregarded.

India's National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC), which outlines mitigation and adaptation strategies for dealing with climate change, fails to accommodate the gender dimension either. Initiatives to understand associations between gender equality and climate change response have come into focus of the action research and policy in India, only recently. Climate Change Adaptation (CCA) programme undertaken by WOTR along with NABARD and the Government of Maharashtra in 2008 in the villages of Ahmednagar district aimed to empower and enable women to participate in the decision-making process at home as well as at the village-level. While CCA does not highlight gender equality indicators in its design and implementation, the onus of driving women driven initiatives rests with implementing project partners.

The lack of recognition of women's participation in environment policy, systemic marginalization of their knowledge and unavailability of gender disaggregated data highlights gender blindness of country's majority of the environment policies which has exacerbated gender-based vulnerability.

6. THE ROAD AHEAD

The road to gender-sensitive decision making requires structural transformation drivers right from the policymaking at trans-national level to project implementation at the local level. It would require engaging actors across all the sections of the society; national governments, state governments, local governments, civil society organizations, indigenous people and local communities and other representatives of sectors related to or dependent on biodiversity.

The gender analysis of current state of environment policy specifically in context to India calls for attention on key drivers which are climate finance, national policies/laws & legislations, state level monitoring and evaluations and community mobilization at local level.

As per Climate Policy Initiative data of 2021, 632 USD billion of climate finance flowed till 2020 out of which mitigation remains as the highest investment (571 USD billion), followed by adaptation (46 USD billion) and dual (15 USD billion) measures. A majority of which flowed to East Asia & Pacific, Western Europe, and the United States & Canada, while South Asia received just 30 USD billion (29).

At the forefront of climate change, role of developed countries becomes pivotal as they must continue to take the lead in mobilizing climate finance from various sources, instruments, and channels through domestic and international strategies to ensure climate finance flows to the least developed and developing countries.

Investments in environment would need to be increased by 4 times by 2050 in order to meet climate change, biodiversity, and land degradation targets. This would require comprehensive system for tracking capital flows in nature driven solutions, increase positive financial flows by de-risking and incentivization, and reduce/divert public financing from potential investments that may contribute to further exacerbation of the climate crisis (28).

National and State governments would be required to integrate the biodiversity values into policies, regulations, planning, development processes, and assessments of environmental impacts at all levels. These national level policies must be aligned with multilateral agreements on biodiversity conservation and climate change for which relevant cooperative mechanisms must be established by promoting active gender balanced participation in alignment with Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration, and the application of the Guidelines for the Development of National Legislation on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (15).

Women's access to land rights is key to achieving gender parity in environment decision making. There is plethora of evidence to substantiate the that owning land would enhance women's well-being, reduce gender-based violence, improve children's health and education, raise farm productivity, increase family food security, and empower women socially and politically. Gender-equal land rights is also a key target in SDG 5. While Government of India initiated the discourse of joint titles to men and women from the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85), the data available presents a rather dark picture. With women constituting a third (32%) of India's agricultural labour force and 55-66% to farm production, women hold only 12.8% of operational holdings in India. This holds them back from accessing credit-based government schemes. Telangana's land schemes intend to help women, specially Dalit women to acquire land in groups. Ideas such as joint ownership and group cultivation by women are already practiced in several states, including Kerala, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Bihar, and West Bengal (4). These state level initiatives must be considered scaling up through national flagship schemes,

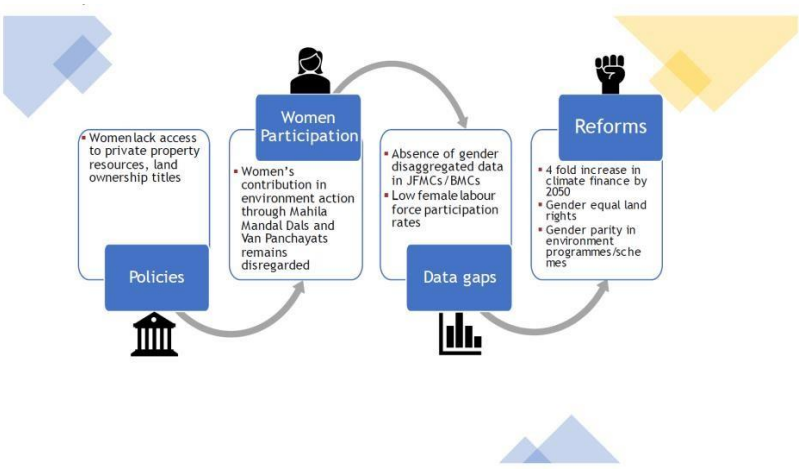
laws, rights and regulations for land entitlements and social attitudes. Furthermore, gender parity must be ensured in human resources management across all the government departments, schemes/law/policies should use gender sensitive language and goals, and gender equality indicators must be incorporated during planning and capacity building processes. Government must spearhead initiatives in collecting, analysing, and using sex and age disaggregated data for the analysis of different links between gender and climate change in a number of sectors including water and sanitation, agriculture, energy security, land use, deforestation and degradation, biodiversity and traditional knowledge forestry, climate financing and disaster risk reduction. Such data can be used to develop knowledge of gendered impacts of disasters and conflict that may further help influence policy-making processes.

At the local level, programmes must be designed to provide non-monetary benefits such as acknowledgment of participation of providers, holders of traditional knowledge in contributing to new research and knowledge repository. Project partners must ensure that environmental recovery programmes take the specific needs of women and children into account. Realtime ground level data can be used to assess acute environmental risks from disasters and conflicts and provide early warning to minimize any adverse impacts on human life (taking into consideration sex and age-differentiated impacts) and support and enhance the role of women as active actors in post-crisis settings.

Lastly, environmental assessment methods must ensure that gender-specific analytical tools and sex disaggregated data collection methods are integrated into the overall country level capacity building approaches as well as in ecosystem management tools.

7. CONCLUSION

Though there has been much deliberation on promoting gender inclusive environment action in India, it is evident that the women remain primarily under-represented across national, state, and local level environment programmes. Furthermore, women's knowledge and capability to contribute to environment action have been systematically marginalized in the current policy landscape. The unavailability of gender disaggregated data has further implications on the policy design, implementation and evaluation accruing gender-based vulnerability. The findings of the current paper suggest that there is a pressing need for adopting a holistic approach that must be driven by climate finance aligned with national policies/laws & legislations, state level monitoring and evaluations and community mobilization at local level.



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[i]Original framework mentions "access to control over resources"