

# Women and Sustainable Development

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*Cet article identifie le rôle joué par les femmes dans le développement durable au 21e siècle et ses implications dans notre société.*

There are various stakeholders such as the government, private sector research institutions, and the development community, which fail to recognize women's role in and contribution to sustainable production and consumption, often because of their informal role. However the influence of women, even in an informal capacity, is far too important to be ignored.

Sustainable development in layman terms means a judicious and efficient use of resources available to meet present day needs and wants, keeping in mind the needs and wants of future generations. As defined by the United Nations sustainable development is based on three basic principles:

- Sustainable use of resources;
- Equitable distribution of resources at the inter-generational level;
- Equitable distribution of resources at the intra generational level.

Inter-generational distribution refers to distribution of resources between young and elder generations

in a family which is subsequently reflected broadly in society. The common interpretation of the term intra-generational equity is often only understood as equity among various economic sections of society. However intra-generational equity also denotes gender equity. Moreover, Soledad Aguilar argues, sustainable development is not possible without gender equity. In fact, it is a prerequisite for any action aimed at improving people's quality of life.

In order to understand the importance of gender equity, it is necessary to identify the role and contribution of women in sustenance and development.

In Rio, women were considered a "major group" whose involvement in the United Nations Earth Summit held in 1992 was a necessary pre-requisite for achieving sustainable development. Ever since gender issues have been given high priority in the international political debate on sustainable development. Chapter 24 of Agenda 21 talks specifically about a global plan of action for women towards sustainable and equitable development. This agenda promotes the formulation of policies and actions by local governments in association with non-governmental organizations.

The International Women's Uni-

versity in Hanover, the first gender-specific university of its kind in Europe, in an announcement in 2000, stated that: "looking at women's work we can see the variety of social engagements, which are necessary for the survival of a society: domestic work, subsistence work, care work, work in the formal and informal sections of labour markets."

Women have been victims of the problem of disguised employment, since time immemorial. Disguised employment is the phenomenon wherein people do not have full-time paid employment, but are not counted in the official unemployment statistics. This disguised employment is most commonly seen in the form of domestic work. Conventional gender roles have usually designated women as in-charge of household work and budgeting. It is the women of the family who decides the kind of groceries that are to be purchased, the recycle and waste disposal practices adopted by a household. These forms of informal policy adopted by women at a minuscule level provide the building blocks for an ecologically sound consumption pattern. For instance, if women adopt the practice of cooking with seasonal vegetable, it increases the consumption of seasonal vegetables, which are a more ecologically sound alternative as opposed to

using unseasonal vegetables that are grown as cash crops. The producers are driven by the simple law of supply and demand to focus more on production of seasonal vegetables. This, in turn, reduces the use of cold storage, chemical fertilizers, artificial means of cultivation, and the use of preservatives to a large extent.

It is evident that a small decision made by a woman at a domestic level play can essential role in adopting a sustainable and ecologically sound consumption and production pattern—that is, insofar as she has the power to make such decisions and to allocate time, resources, and the labour to adopt such practices at the micro level.

In the so-called developing countries, the formal work done by women is largely in the agriculture sector. Women are primarily responsible for cultivating food crops, vegetables, managing small animals and running small-scale commercial agriculture enterprises. Women account for an average of 43 percent of agriculture jobs among developing countries, and for nearly 50 percent in some countries in Africa and Asia. Women represent only 12 percent of fishery labour but over 65 percent of the 400 million livestock keepers (United Nations).

Many cultures revere older women who possess a seemingly infinite amount of knowledge of management of natural resources, such as, for example, how to preserve seeds for best yields, or patterns of crop rotation for preserving nutrients of the soil. Though exaggerated by folklore, this mythical perception is firmly rooted in reality: Indigenous women have spent centuries gathering, sharing and preserving knowledge in the realms of botany, agricultural livestock, health and nutrition, and other environmental knowledge. Many women have also taken economic advantage of their knowledge when market realities have allowed.

Moreover women worldwide, specifically in developing countries, spend more than 200 million hours per day collecting water and have

developed considerable knowledge about water resources, including their location, quality and storage methods. Just like any other job gives the highest value to experience, the policy makers of sustainable development have a treasure to gain from these women. The biggest challenge faced by women around the work with respect to this is that women own less than 20 percent of the natural resources even today.

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**“The land we hold in trust is our wealth. It is the only wealth we could possibly pass on to our children. Good old Mother Earth with all her bounty and rich culture we have adopted from her treasures is our wealth. Without our homelands, we become true paupers.”**

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This poses a problem as a majority of decision-making power lies with the men (and often wealthy or foreign men who do not share the same connection to the environment), while women are reduced to being nurses to an increasingly ill or degraded environment.

Peasant and Indigenous women are undoubtedly the major contributors to subsistence economies (Kuokkanen 220). Subsistence economies have successfully existed for centuries in all parts of the world. This has only been possible because the methods of production, however small scale they may be have been, are sustainable. The importance of subsistence economies was first recognized in the subsistence approach advocated by

Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt Thomsen, which linked subsistence work to sustainable production. Some would argue that subsistence work only contributes to the gross domestic production in decimal percentages. However, in recent times, subsistence work has also played a vital role in replenishing the environment and reforming practices. Many such subsistence projects have been successful around the world. Rwandan farmers have brought to market organic “women’s coffee.” In Kenya and Zimbabwe, women are protecting and planting indigenous and medieval trees, establishing bee populations in arid areas, and learning how to maintain them while processing trees and honey for sale. Women in Benin have adopted environmentally sustainable methods of oyster harvesting and are also reforestation a lagoon to ensure it can continue to provide livelihood.

Women have proven themselves to be a force to be recognized when it comes to bringing about reform and change. Women have time and again challenged existing power relations and, discriminatory laws, policies, and institutions to demand for example the right to land ownership and they are continuously striving to improve their status in society. In Rio, women were considered a “major group” whose involvement in the United Nations Earth Summit of 1992 was a necessary pre-requisite for achieving sustainable development. Ever since, gender issues have been given high priority in the international political debate on sustainable development. Chapter 24 of Agenda 21 talks specifically about a global plan of action for women towards sustainable and equitable development. This agenda promotes the formulation of policies and actions by local governments in association with non-governmental organizations.

There has been a long-standing relationship between women and nature that can be explained as the personification of nature as a mother, since both create and nurture life. It