




# Women's Leadership in Grassroots Environmental Movements

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## Abstract

Women's secure access to land and natural resources remains a crucial factor for ensuring gender equality and sustainable development. Although the statutory laws in many jurisdictions formally recognize women's property and rights related to other resources, their implementation is often constrained by entrenched customary norms and patriarchal traditions. This paper examines the conflict between statutory and customary legal frameworks and its impact on women's access, control, and participation in resource governance. A mixed-methods design is attempted in this paper, where the research combines doctrinal legal analysis and community-level case studies, supported by comparative policy analysis across global jurisdictions. The study examines legal contradictions and institutional gaps in the background of feminist legal theory, environmental jurisprudence, and legal pluralism. The result shows the exclusion of gender from ownership of resources and the decision-making process. It highlights that different types of laws and weak enforcement systems affect women's tenure security, while the gender-responsive legal reforms and participatory governance models promote sustainable stewardship. The study suggests measures for reform, including amendments to the law and rules and gender quotas in resource management bodies. This is to balance legal frameworks and recognize women's rights. This research is a valuable contribution to the literature on gender and environmental law since it connects women's tenure with the aspects of security and sustainability outcomes. It establishes that promoting women's equitable access to natural resources is not only a matter of justice but also a critical component of effective and sustainable environmental management.

**Keywords:** Gender Equality, Sustainable Development, Customary norms, Legal Framework, Environmental justice

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## 1. Introduction

In the backdrop of large-scale environmental degradation, Indian women have been taking a lead in environmental movements. They advocate for the protection of natural resources and recognition of community rights. However, their leadership is often drawn by necessity rather than by formal acceptance. Prevailing inequalities in the availability of natural resources like land, water, and forests contribute to this (Agarwal, 2010). This study makes a doctrinal analysis of women's leadership in grassroots environmental movements. The intersection of gender, law, and environmental justice is subjected to a deep study. The fragmentation caused by statutory frameworks and customary norms within different geographic locations and social groupings shapes women's roles in environmental protection (Gadgil & Guha, 1995). It examines how global experiences can influence gender-sensitive reforms in environmental laws and policies.

Adopting feminist legal theory, legal pluralism, and environmental jurisprudence, the research exposes the structural barriers that women face in natural resource management (Kameri-Mbote, 2007). Feminist legal theory, especially ecofeminist jurisprudence, highlights how patriarchy results not only in sidelining women but also in facilitating exploitation of natural resources (Shiva, 1988). This approach points to the fact that patriarchal systems suppress women and nature alike. An inclusive legal structure that prioritizes both gender equality and environmental sustainability is the need of the hour.

Feminist legal theory makes inroads into the aspects of how law, often characterized as neutral and certain, promotes gender-based inequalities (MacKinnon, 1989). It challenges patriarchal systems incorporated in legal institutions, norms, and interpretations that have maintained women as marginalized sections and excluded their experiences from legal domains. By combining the characteristics of gender with class, caste, and race, feminist theory attempts to refine legal principles to promote substantive equality rather than mere formal equality (Crenshaw, 1991). In environmental contexts, it defines how women manage resources and their disproportionate exposure to ecological harm. It necessitates gender-sensitive legal frameworks giving importance to justice, inclusion, and equitable access to resources.

The study examines famous environmental movements led by women, including the Chipko Movement, the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, and the Standing Rock protests in the United

States. These movements challenge patriarchal and exploitative systems by illustrating the crucial role played by women in environmental conservation and community empowerment (Guha, 1989; Maathai, 2003; Estes, 2019). For example, the Chipko Movement, led by Gaura Devi, used nonviolent resistance to prevent deforestation, leading to legal reforms and strengthening women's status as ecological stewards (Guha, 1989). Similarly, Kenya's Green Belt Movement under Wangari Maathai mobilized women to plant millions of trees, fostering policy changes and global awareness of women's role in environmental governance (Maathai, 2003). In the United States, Indigenous women's leadership in the Standing Rock protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline highlighted the intersection of environmental justice, Indigenous rights, and gender equity (Estes, 2019).

These grassroots movements resulted in national policies and international environmental dialogues, helping to portray gender as a crucial dimension of environmental justice (United Nations, 2014). They underscore the necessity of integrating women's perspectives and leadership in environmental decisions and legal frameworks to achieve equitable and sustainable resource governance. By analyzing these cases, the study reveals how gender-responsive legal reforms can emerge from a combination of constitutional guarantees, international treaties such as CEDAW and the Rio Declaration, and grassroots activism (United Nations, 1979; United Nations, 1992).

In summary, this research illustrates that women's leadership in environmental movements is not only critical for ecological preservation but also essential for ensuring social justice. Their activism exposes systemic inequalities and promotes a transformative vision of environmental law, one rooted in equity, inclusivity, and respect for both human and ecological rights. Through doctrinal and comparative analysis, the study advocates for legal frameworks that recognize and empower women as key actors in shaping a just and sustainable future.

## **2. Methodology and Doctrinal Basis**

This study is based on doctrinal legal research as its primary method. It involves a detailed examination of constitutional provisions, statutory laws, judicial decisions, and international conventions related to gender equality and environmental justice. Complementary comparative and policy analysis is applied to evaluate how different jurisdictions incorporate women's environmental rights within legal and institutional frameworks (Menski, 2006).

Primary sources include national constitutions and environmental protection statutes, international treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (United Nations, 1979), the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (United Nations, 1992), and the Convention on Biological Diversity (United Nations, 1992), along with landmark judicial decisions recognizing women's environmental rights.

Women's leadership in grassroots environmental movements depicts how women help protect the environment and bring fairness to communities. At a global level, women have taken the lead in local movements to protect forests, water, and land. Their responses are powerful because they arise from personal experiences with environmental issues in their regions and the direct impact of these challenges on their lives (Agarwal, 2010).

Laws and international agreements also support women's role in protecting the environment. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) recognizes that women, especially in rural areas, play a key role in managing natural resources (United Nations, 1979). Other important frameworks, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasize the importance of women's participation in environmental decision-making and sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). The relationship between rural women's rights to land and security of tenure is crucial in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (FAO, 2011). Women have a crucial role in all SDGs, with many targets evidently recognizing women's equality and empowerment as both the objective and part of the solution. Goal 5, dedicated to achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, stands as the stand-alone gender goal, emphasizing the importance of these aims (Vidya & Chakraborty, 2025).

The convergence between SDGs and the provisions of CEDAW further strengthens this framework. SDG 5 on gender equality, particularly Target 5.a, directly corresponds to CEDAW General Recommendation No. 34 (2016) on the rights of rural women, which calls upon States to take legislative and policy measures to ensure women's equal access to land and natural resources (CEDAW Committee, 2016). The SDGs, especially those relating to gender equality (SDG 5), climate action (SDG 13), and life on land (SDG 15), advocate sustainable resource management, biodiversity conservation, and women's empowerment (United Nations, 2015). Empowering women is therefore essential for achieving sustainable

development. India ratified CEDAW in 1993, and Article 14(2)(g) obligates State Parties to ensure equal treatment of women in land and agrarian reforms (United Nations, 1979).

In countries like India, courts have increasingly connected environmental rights with women's rights. Judicial interpretations of the right to life under Article 21 of the Constitution had been expanded to include environmental protection. The Supreme Court of India has emphasized the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation and climate change on marginalized communities, including women, recognizing the need to protect environmental rights as human rights (Shiva, 1988). However, many decisions still do not fully address gender-specific impacts, leaving scope for further development.

Looking at different countries, women have led significant environmental movements. In India, women played central roles in the Chipko Movement and the Narmada Bachao Andolan, using traditional knowledge and collective action to resist deforestation and displacement (Guha, 1989). In Kenya, the Green Belt Movement led by Wangari Maathai demonstrated how women can promote environmental conservation while influencing policy (Maathai, 2003). Similar movements led by Indigenous women in Latin America further highlight women's global role in environmental protection (United Nations, 2014).

Women leaders adopt various methods, including community mobilization, awareness-building, and engagement with local governance structures. These efforts not only support environmental protection but also enhance women's participation in decision-making. However, women often face challenges such as exclusion from leadership roles and threats during protests. Studies indicate that women environmental defenders are particularly vulnerable to violence, especially when opposing powerful economic interests (UNEP, 2019). This underscores the need for stronger legal protections and policy measures to safeguard their contributions.

Secondary sources include academic literature, policy reports, and gender-environment studies produced by organizations such as UN Women, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which provide critical insights into gender-responsive environmental governance.

### **3. Women's Leadership in Grassroots Environmental Movements**

The Chipko Movement of the 1970s remains one of the earliest examples of women's collective action for environmental justice. Originating in the Garhwal Himalayas, women villagers embraced trees to prevent deforestation by commercial loggers. The movement not only restrained deforestation but also redefined environmental activism as a struggle for livelihood, autonomy, and ecological balance (Guha, 1989; Shiva, 1988). The role of women in grassroots environmental movements in India is commendable for its direct contributions to both environmental protection and social justice, with legal recognition and influence demonstrated through various landmark developments.

This world-famous movement, where women led by Gaura Devi hugged trees to prevent felling, demonstrates grassroots female activism shaping forest conservation. The movement influenced policy developments such as the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, incorporating environmental concerns into formal lawmaking (Guha, 1989). It highlighted women's traditional ecological knowledge and dependence on forests, positioning them as leaders in environmental stewardship rather than passive victims of environmental degradation (Agarwal, 2010).

The movement represents the strength of women's leadership in environmental matters. It challenged entrenched gender norms by placing women at the center of public protest and decision-making related to natural resources. This shift continues to inspire ecofeminist activism globally (Shiva, 1988). It also established a strong relationship between women and environmental protection.

Further, the movement demonstrates how indigenous and traditional knowledge can complement modern conservation strategies. Practices such as sacred groves and community forest management in Himalayan regions reflect long-standing traditions aligned with sustainable ecological principles (Gadgil & Guha, 1995).

In a similar fashion, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, led by Medha Patkar, mobilized resistance against large dam projects affecting livelihoods and ecosystems. The movement gained international attention and led to the withdrawal of funding support by the World Bank in 1993 following concerns over environmental and social impacts (World Bank, 1993). It reflects how women's leadership in environmental justice intersects with human rights, displacement, and rehabilitation issues, influencing legal and policy discourse (Dwivedi, 1999).

The Narmada Bachao Andolan, initiated in 1985, opposed the Sardar Sarovar Dam project on the Narmada River, which spans the states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra. The project involved multiple dams and posed risks of large-scale displacement and ecological damage. Under the leadership of Medha Patkar, the movement adopted Gandhian methods such as non-violent protest, satyagraha, and hunger strikes. These efforts played a significant role in drawing global attention to issues of environmental justice and development-induced displacement (Dwivedi, 1999).

In Kerala, Mayilamma led a grassroots campaign against Coca-Cola's groundwater extraction in Plachimada. The movement highlighted corporate environmental exploitation and its disproportionate impact on women's access to water. It led to public interest litigation and policy debates on sustainable resource use, reflecting women's voices in environmental governance (Bijoy, 2006).

Wangari Maathai founded the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, which began as a tree-planting initiative and evolved into a broader movement for democracy, human rights, and women's empowerment. By mobilizing rural women to plant millions of trees, the movement demonstrated the interdependence between ecological restoration and gender justice (Maathai, 2003).

Indigenous women leaders in the United States played a central role in the Standing Rock protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline. The movement aimed to assert Indigenous sovereignty over ancestral lands and protect access to clean water. Women's leadership revitalized Indigenous environmental resistance and brought global attention to the gendered dimensions of environmental justice, reinforcing women's role as custodians of natural resources (Estes, 2019).

#### **4. Legal Framework: Gender, Property, and Environment**

The constitutional recognition of women's rights to land and natural resources represents a significant facet of advancing gender equality and environmental justice. In India, a set of constitutional provisions supports this objective. Article 14 ensures equality before the law, while Article 21 guarantees the right to life, which the judiciary has expansively interpreted to include the right to a clean and healthy environment (Government of India, 1950; Sharma,

2015). Together, these provisions affirm that women are entitled to equal participation in and enjoyment of environmental rights.

Articles 19(1)(a) and 19(1)(g) further operationalize this framework by protecting women's rights to freedom of expression and the freedom to pursue any occupation or profession (Government of India, 1950). These rights encompass women's ability to engage in environmental decision-making processes and community-based activism, thereby reinforcing their leadership roles at the grassroots level.

In addition, Article 51A(g) establishes a fundamental duty on citizens to protect and enhance the natural environment, including forests, rivers, and wildlife. This constitutional directive underpins the moral and civic legitimacy of women-led environmental movements aimed at preserving ecological balance and promoting sustainable resource use (Government of India, 1950). Complementing this, Articles 243D and 243T mandate the reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Municipal Bodies, ensuring institutional representation and enabling their participation in environmental governance at the local level (Rai, 2011).

At the global level, several constitutional frameworks have similarly recognized women's environmental and property rights. The Constitution of Kenya (2010) guarantees equal rights to property and land, while the Constitution of South Africa emphasizes equitable access to natural resources and land reform (UN Women, 2018). These comparative frameworks reflect an emerging global trend toward gender-inclusive environmental governance.

The Supreme Court of India has progressively linked environmental rights with fundamental rights. In *M.K. Ranjitsinh v. Union of India* (2024), the Court affirmed that the right to a clean environment forms an integral part of the right to life under Article 21, reinforcing the State's obligation to maintain ecological balance (Supreme Court of India, 2024). Although not exclusively focused on gender, the judgment supports broader claims related to vulnerable communities, including women.

Further, judicial innovation has been reflected in environmental adjudication mechanisms such as the "Green Bench" of the Madras High Court, which applied principles such as the "polluter pays" and precautionary principles. The polluter pays principle, first articulated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in 1972, holds that those responsible for pollution must bear the costs of environmental damage (OECD, 1972). This

principle has been incorporated into Indian environmental jurisprudence, notably in *Vellore Citizens' Welfare Forum v. Union of India* (1996), where the Supreme Court recognized it as part of the law of the land under Article 21 (Supreme Court of India, 1996). Such principles promote environmental accountability and sustainable industrial practices, indirectly supporting the demands raised by grassroots women's movements.

At the global level, movements such as the Green Belt Movement led by Wangari Maathai demonstrate how women's environmental activism has influenced policy and governance frameworks (Maathai, 2003). These examples reinforce the role of women as key actors in environmental decision-making.

Women leaders in Indian grassroots environmental movements have contributed to legal reforms through public interest litigation and advocacy. Movements such as the Chipko Movement, Narmada Bachao Andolan, and the Plachimada anti-Coca-Cola struggle illustrate how women's activism has shaped environmental laws and policies (Guha, 1989; Dwivedi, 1999; Bijoy, 2006). These contributions highlight their dual role in environmental conservation and social justice.

Despite these legal provisions, a significant implementation gap persists. In many rural and customary law contexts, patriarchal norms, male-dominated institutions, and discriminatory inheritance practices continue to restrict women's access to land and natural resources (Agarwal, 2010). This creates a "legal pluralism gap," where formal rights remain ineffective in practice (Menski, 2006). Although the Constitution guarantees equality and non-discrimination, the pluralistic nature of the Indian legal system poses challenges to enforcement.

At the international level, instruments such as CEDAW General Recommendation No. 34 (2016), the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), and Agenda 21 emphasize the importance of integrating women's perspectives into environmental governance (United Nations, 1995; CEDAW Committee, 2016). However, the absence of binding enforcement mechanisms and weak domestic implementation continue to limit their transformative impact.

## **5. Doctrinal Analysis: Law and Gendered Environmental Governance**

A doctrinal analysis of environmental legislation reveals that most statutory frameworks employ gender-neutral terminology. While such neutrality appears inclusive, it often conceals

and perpetuates structural inequalities. By treating all individuals as formally equal, these frameworks overlook the historically unequal social, economic, and cultural conditions that shape how different genders experience environmental degradation and access related rights (Agarwal, 2010). For instance, environmental statutes in many jurisdictions refer broadly to “citizens,” “farmers,” or “artisans,” without acknowledging the gendered dimensions of land ownership, resource control, and environmental participation. This lack of differentiation frequently results in the exclusion of women—particularly those from rural and Indigenous communities—from decision-making processes and access to environmental resources (FAO, 2011).

Gender-neutral laws, though seemingly equitable, often reinforce existing patriarchal structures. In many societies, customary land tenure systems and inheritance practices favour men as primary landowners and resource controllers. Consequently, even where environmental laws guarantee equal rights in principle, their implementation remains skewed due to socio-cultural norms and institutional biases (Agarwal, 2010). For example, women's limited ownership of land restricts their eligibility for government-supported conservation programs or agricultural subsidies that require formal land titles. This creates what may be termed “practical inequality,” wherein women disproportionately bear the consequences of environmental degradation—such as water scarcity, deforestation, and biodiversity loss—without possessing the legal authority or institutional support to address these challenges (UN Women, 2018).

However, progressive shifts are visible in jurisdictions such as India, where the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, incorporates gender-sensitive provisions. The Act recognizes women's equal rights to land by mandating joint ownership titles for spouses and extending land rights to unmarried, widowed, and deserted women. It also requires that women constitute at least one-third of the membership in forest rights committees, which are responsible for processing and verifying claims (Government of India, 2006). These provisions strengthen women's land rights and ensure their active participation in forest governance and decision-making processes (Agarwal, 2010).

In contrast, jurisdictions that have explicitly integrated gender mainstreaming into environmental law demonstrate more substantive outcomes. For instance, Rwanda's Organic Land Law (2005) guarantees gender equality in land ownership and explicitly recognizes

women's rights to inherit and co-own property. This reform has significantly enhanced women's participation in agricultural decision-making and natural resource governance (FAO, 2011). Similarly, Bolivia's Law of the Rights of Mother Earth (2012) adopts an ecofeminist orientation by linking environmental protection with Indigenous knowledge systems and women's stewardship roles. It promotes women's representation in local environmental governance and recognizes their traditional ecological knowledge as integral to sustainable development (UN Women, 2018).

These examples demonstrate that substantive equality—rather than mere formal equality—is essential for achieving environmental justice. Formal equality, which ensures identical legal treatment, often fails to address entrenched gender disparities. In contrast, substantive equality acknowledges historical disadvantages and seeks to correct them through targeted measures such as affirmative action, representation quotas, and gender-sensitive policy frameworks (Crenshaw, 1991).

Accordingly, achieving meaningful environmental justice requires a shift from gender-neutral legal frameworks to gender-transformative systems that actively empower women as agents of environmental governance. Such an approach not only advances gender equity but also contributes to more inclusive, sustainable, and effective environmental management.

## **6. Comparative Lessons and Policy Implications**

The representation of women in environmental governance is essential to achieving gender justice and sustainable development. Historically, environmental decision-making bodies—such as forest councils, water user associations, and community resource management institutions—have been dominated by men, resulting in the marginalization of women's voices despite their significant role in natural resource management (Agarwal, 2010). Legal mandates such as gender quotas can help correct this imbalance by promoting women's formal participation and influence in decision-making processes.

Empirical studies demonstrate that when women participate meaningfully in resource governance, both ecological and social outcomes improve. Community forest groups in East Africa with higher female representation have shown stronger rule compliance, increased transparency, and more sustainable forest regeneration (Agarwal, 2009). Similarly, women's

participation in forest committees in India and Nepal has been associated with improved conservation outcomes and more equitable benefit sharing (Agarwal, 2010).

Women actively participate and lead in environmental movements, advocating for marginalized communities and Indigenous populations and responding to environmental challenges across regions. However, despite their active engagement, women often face limited access to formal decision-making processes and governance institutions (UN Women, 2018). Although certain legal provisions and forest governance policies recognize women's rights, effective participation remains constrained in practice.

Gender quotas serve as important institutional mechanisms to overcome structural and cultural barriers that restrict women's participation. Embedding quotas within national legislation or local governance frameworks can ensure minimum representation—for instance, mandating that 30–50% of seats in environmental decision-making bodies be held by women. Such measures align with international commitments under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 13 (Climate Action) (United Nations, 1979; United Nations, 2015). However, the effectiveness of quotas depends not only on numerical inclusion but also on strengthening women's leadership capacities, ensuring access to resources, and reforming laws that limit their agency.

Bolivia provides a notable example of gender-responsive environmental governance. Reforms under the Law of the Rights of Mother Earth and related community-based environmental frameworks have encouraged women's participation in local governance structures and resource management (UN Women, 2018). This reflects a shift toward integrating gender perspectives into environmental policy and practice.

In India, policies such as the National Forest Policy and Joint Forest Management guidelines promote women's participation in forest governance institutions. However, implementation remains uneven across regions (Government of India, 1988; Agarwal, 2010). Strengthening these frameworks through enforceable legislative quotas would institutionalize gender equality as a governance norm rather than a policy aspiration.

Ultimately, equitable representation of women enhances democratic legitimacy and strengthens environmental resilience. The inclusion of diverse perspectives leads to more inclusive, participatory, and sustainable natural resource management strategies. Therefore,

legislating gender quotas in environmental governance bodies is essential for achieving both substantive gender equality and effective environmental stewardship.

## 7. Conclusion

The active involvement of women in grassroots environmental movements reflects the transformative power of inclusive environmental governance. A doctrinal study reveals that while statutes increasingly include women's rights, implementation remains a bottleneck by the presence of patriarchal structures and fragmented legal systems. Comparative insights absorbed from Chipko to Green Belt and Standing Rock clearly show that women's empowerment is both an outcome and a driving force of sustainable environmental management.

Generally, environmental laws use gender-neutral language and look fair, but in reality, they often hide deep inequalities. When law provides equality, treating everybody equal before the law, it does not reflect the existing historical and social differences. The women, especially from rural and indigenous communities facing unique issues in owning land or accessing resources, are overlooked. This shows that women suffer the most from ecological problems like deforestation or water scarcity but have little authority to make decisions about them. Realizing the harm done to these women, some countries have made changes. While India's *Forest Rights Act (2006)* gives women equal rights to forest land, Rwanda's *Organic Land Law (2005)* and Bolivia's *Law of the Rights of Mother Earth (2012)* actively support women's land ownership and leadership in environmental issue-related matters. Equality arrives when laws acknowledge harsh realities, not when they ignore them. Environmental justice requires laws that empower women, ensure their issues are settled in decision-making, and make them real partners in building a sustainable future.

To sum up, women's leadership in grassroots environmental movements is crucial for protecting the planet and promoting justice. Laws should aim at supporting women's roles and ensuring they have a say in environmental decisions. Instances of women-led movements from different countries show that when women lead, communities and nature benefit greatly.

For attaining environmental justice, legal frameworks must evolve from gender neutrality to gender responsiveness. At all levels of environmental decision-making, equity can be added by this measure. Empowering women as leaders is not a mere social requirement but a

doctrinal necessity for ensuring justice, sustainability, and resilience in times of environmental degradation.

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