



# Concrescence: Journal of Multi- Disciplinary Research

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Volume 2, Number 2, 2025, E-ISSN: 1595-9287

*Available:*

<https://journals.casjournals.com/index.php/CJMR/index>

# **Gender Equality and Sustainable Development: A Pathway to Inclusive and Resilient Societies**

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## ***Abstract***

This paper investigates the relationship between gender equality and sustainable development, arguing that societies cannot achieve inclusivity without addressing entrenched gender disparities. Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but also a cornerstone of sustainable development. This paper examined the theoretical underpinnings, historical evolution, governance frameworks, and forward-looking strategies that underscore the symbiotic relationship between gender equity and sustainability. Achieving inclusive and resilient societies requires dismantling patriarchal systems, investing in gender-sensitive policies, and embracing interdisciplinary innovation. As global challenges such as climate change and inequality intensify, centring gender in sustainable development is both a moral imperative and a strategic necessity.

**Keywords:** Gender equality, Sustainable Development, Inclusivity, Human Right

## **Introduction**

Gender equality, according to the UN Sustainable Development Goal 5, is a fundamental human right and a crucial foundation for a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world. It entails ensuring that individuals of all genders have equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities. Achieving gender equality is not only a moral imperative but also a vital strategy for fostering inclusive and resilient societies through social, economic, and environmental dimensions. Inclusivity in the context of gender disparities and sustainable

development refers to the integration of gender equality into the economic growth and development strategies with a premium on care and social reproduction in macroeconomic models and promoting inclusive growth that benefits all members of the society thereby contributing to more equitable and sustainable development (UN-Women, 2025).

Resilience, on the other hand, is the ability of individuals, communities, or systems to withstand and recover from shocks, stresses, and crises. Within the ambit of gender issues and sustainable development, resilience might refer to the capacity of women and marginalized communities to adapt to and cope with the impacts of climate change, economic instability, or social inequality (*Gender Snapshot*, 2024). In the context of sustainable development, resilience is often linked to the ability of systems to absorb and respond to disturbances while maintaining their functionality. This concept can be applied to gender disparities by recognizing the importance of building the resilience of women and girls to overcome the challenges they face in achieving sustainable development.

Despite the pursuit of sustainable development as a defining challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century encompassing environmental stewardship, economic vitality, and social inclusion, gender equality is increasingly recognized as a crucial component of this agenda. It is both a goal in its own right and a means to accelerate progress across all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This paper investigates the relationship between gender equality and sustainable development, arguing that societies cannot achieve resilience and inclusivity without addressing entrenched gender disparities. Drawing from Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Wangari's Feminist Political Ecology (FPE), Sen's (1999) Capability Approach, Nussbaum's (2000) Human Development Approach, and Intersectionality Theory as propounded by Crenshaw (1989), this study presents a comprehensive analysis of how gender equality can serve as a transformative force for sustainable development.

## Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Foundations

Gender equality and sustainable development are intrinsically linked. The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development identifies gender equality as both a standalone goal (SDG 5) and a cross-cutting theme essential to achieving all other goals (UN, 2015). Conceptually, sustainable development refers to meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland Commission, 1987). Gender equality, in this context, means equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for individuals regardless of gender.

Feminist political ecology offers a valuable framework to analyze gendered environmental relations. It argues that women and men interact differently with natural resources due to their distinct social roles, responsibilities, and access to power (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, & Wangari, 1996). This approach challenges the notion of a gender-neutral environment, highlighting how policy and development interventions can exacerbate or alleviate gender inequalities. For example, access to clean water and land rights often disproportionately affects women, particularly in rural areas where they are primarily responsible for household resource management.

Sen's (1999) capability approach and Nussbaum's (2000) elaboration on human development provide a robust framework to evaluate how gender inequality limits individuals' freedoms and capabilities. Adequate provision of the range of choices and opportunities available to all genders in society can boost the opportunities for all-around development. The emphasis on capabilities—such as education, health, political

participation, and security—aligns with a broader understanding of human well-being beyond economic growth. As such, the capability approach is centred on the well-being of the people without any gender bias to promote development and social justice (Sen, 1985, 2001; Robeyns, 2016). In other words, development can only be achieved when a group of people have equal access to economic empowerment opportunities, political and social freedoms, coupled with good provisions for health and basic education (Sen, 1999).

Intersectionality theory, another theory adopted for this study, introduced by Crenshaw (1989), underscores the importance of considering how gender intersects with other social categories such as race, class, and ethnicity in shaping development outcomes. For instance, Indigenous women may face compounded disadvantages that are not captured by gender or ethnicity alone. These frameworks collectively reveal that achieving sustainable development without gender equity is both theoretically and practically unachievable.

## **Historical Context and Global Trends in Gender Disparities**

Historically, women have been excluded from formal development processes. During the post-colonial development era of the 1950s and 1960s, mainstream economic models largely ignored the role of women, treating them as passive beneficiaries rather than active agents. The Women in Development (WID) movement of the 1970s sought to integrate women into existing development frameworks but failed to challenge the underlying patriarchal structures (Moser, 1993). The shift to the Gender and Development (GAD) approach in the 1980s marked a conceptual breakthrough by focusing on power relations and advocating structural changes to promote equity. GAD emphasized the importance of analysing both women's and men's roles in development and advocated for the transformation of the institutions that perpetuate gender disparities.

International milestones such as the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 significantly promoted the global discourse on gender equality. However, critics argue that the MDGs lacked an integrated approach to gender across all goals (Sweetman, 2005). The transition to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 amended this oversight by embedding gender considerations across multiple goals, such as those related to poverty (SDG 1), education (SDG 4), and climate action (SDG 13). Recent global trends show progress in some areas, such as increased access to education for girls and improved maternal health. According to UNESCO (2021), the global gender gap in primary and secondary education has narrowed significantly over the past two decades. Nonetheless, challenges remain. Women continue to constitute a majority of the global poor, face disproportionate impacts from climate change, and remain underrepresented in political and economic leadership (UN Women, 2020; 2025).

Moreover, gender inequality persists worldwide, manifesting in disparities in education, employment, health, and political representation. Women, particularly in low-income regions, often face restricted access to resources, decision-making power, and economic opportunities. For instance, studies revealed that while women constitute 43% of the agricultural labour force in developing countries, they own less than 20% of the land, limiting their ability to adopt sustainable practices (FAO 2011). Also, the Inter-Parliamentary Union's (IPU) report indicates that, as of January 2024, women hold 26.9% of parliamentary seats globally. This figure reflects slow progress in women's political representation and highlights women's gross underrepresentation in decision-making

bodies, as women's equal participation and leadership in political and public life are essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

In policy and leadership, women's underrepresentation in environmental governance stifles inclusive solutions. Studies show their involvement enhances conservation success and community resilience. However, data show that women are underrepresented at all levels of decision-making worldwide and that achieving gender parity in political life is far off. (Inter-Parliamentary Union-Women in National Parliaments, as of 1 January 2025).

Sustainability challenges like climate change, resource depletion, and environmental degradation threaten global stability. These challenges intersect with social and economic systems, requiring equitable solutions. Vulnerable communities, especially those dependent on natural resources, face heightened risks, with women and children fourteen times more likely to die in disasters due to structural inequities (United Nations Development Programme). Women's roles in water collection, agriculture, and household care make them critical to sustainable resource use, yet unequal access to land, credit, and technology hinders progress. Gender norms often restrict women's mobility and resilience during crises, exacerbating their exposure to climate impacts. For instance, the UNDP reported that of the 230,000 people killed in the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, 70 percent were women.

Addressing the duo of gender equality and sustainability is imperative. The role of women in sustainable development is multidimensional, and their voices need to be included at the forefront. They are often the first responders to their families, have unique ideas and perspectives, and often drive change at various levels. Empowering women through education, resource access, and leadership roles unlocks transformative potential for equitable, resilient societies. Sustainable development cannot be achieved without leveraging the full contributions of women, as they constitute close to half of the world's population, according to recent global data by the World Bank and United Nations. UNESCO (2023) reports that educating girls yields significant returns, with each additional year of schooling increasing a woman's earnings by 10-20%. Educated women are more likely to invest in their families' health and education, breaking poverty cycles. The Global Education Monitoring Report (2022) notes that closing gender gaps in education could boost GDP growth by 0.5-1% annually in low-income countries.

Concerning resource access and economic impact, the International Monetary Fund (2023) highlights that women's access to financial resources, land, and technology could increase global GDP by \$5-6 trillion annually. The Food and Agriculture Organization (2022) states that equal access to agricultural resources for women could reduce global hunger by 12-17%, enhancing food security.

In leadership and governance, the UN Women (2024) reports that women in leadership roles improve institutional performance and policy outcomes, with countries led by women showing stronger responses to crises like COVID-19. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023) notes that women hold only 26.5% of parliamentary seats globally, underscoring the need for greater representation to drive equitable policies.

Nonetheless, some countries have emerged as leaders in gender-equitable sustainable development. For instance, Nordic countries like Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden have consistently topped the Global Gender Gap Index and demonstrate high

performance in sustainability metrics (World Economic Forum, 2023). Their success is attributed to comprehensive welfare systems, strong labour rights, and inclusive governance. Conversely, in many Least Developed Countries (LDCs) like Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burundi, and the Central African Republic, persistent gender norms, weak institutions, and limited resources hinder progress.

## **Governance, Policy, and Institutional Mechanisms**

Governance systems and institutional frameworks play a pivotal role in operationalizing gender equality within sustainable development. Effective gender governance requires mainstreaming gender considerations into all levels of policy-making, from local to global. This includes integrating gender perspectives into national development plans, climate policies, and budgetary allocations.

International instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Paris Agreement emphasize the need for gender-sensitive approaches in human rights and environmental policy respectively. The UNFCCC's Gender Action Plan provides a roadmap for integrating gender into climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies (UNFCCC, 2019). These global commitments must be translated into national legislation and institutional reforms.

National-level mechanisms include gender-responsive budgeting, which allocates public resources in ways that address gender disparities, and institutional gender focal points that ensure accountability. For instance, Rwanda has achieved notable success in integrating gender across policy sectors, partly due to its constitutional mandates and gender quotas (Burnet, 2008). Similarly, Sweden's feminist foreign policy prioritizes gender equality in all international engagements.

However, implementation challenges persist. Many institutional mechanisms lack adequate funding, political commitment, and technical capacity. Gender considerations often remain minimal, with limited influence on actual policy outcomes. Moreover, gender remains sidelined in key sectors such as energy, transportation, and agriculture, despite its relevance. Bridging these gaps requires a paradigm shift toward inclusive governance models that actively engage women and marginalized communities in decision-making processes.

The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2023) indicates that at current rates, gender parity will take 131 years to achieve. Barriers like discriminatory laws, violence, and unpaid care work (women perform 2.6 times more unpaid care than men, per ILO 2022) hinder progress. Empowering women strengthens societal resilience, as seen in community-led recovery efforts post-disasters (UNDP 2023). By dismantling systemic barriers and challenging socio-cultural norms, gender equality fosters inclusive education systems that benefit marginalized groups and society at large.

## **Pathways Forward: Fostering Innovative Approaches to Sustainable Development**

Addressing gender inequality in sustainable development necessitates interdisciplinary and innovative approaches that transcend traditional silo mentality. A promising strategy is the promotion of inclusive green economies, which recognize the role of women in low-carbon transitions. Policies that support female entrepreneurship in renewable energy, like the Solar Sister entrepreneurs found in Uganda, Rwanda, and South Sudan. For example, solar cooperatives led by women in Sub-Saharan Africa have increased energy access and



economic independence. (UNFCCC, 2024). Another initiative of a non-profit organization, Sisters of Code, aims at empowering women and girls in technology to bridge the gap in access to technology and provide thriving educational programmes for female entrepreneurs. Also, climate-resilient agriculture can enhance both gender equity and sustainability (UNDP, 2022; UN-Women, 2025).

Urban planning also offers opportunities for innovation. Feminist urbanism advocates for designing cities that prioritize safety, accessibility, and well-being for all genders. This includes investing in gender-sensitive public transport, sanitation, and housing. Urban resilience plans that integrate gender analyses are more likely to address the needs of vulnerable populations during disasters (Dutton, J. *et al*, 2022).

Technology and digital innovation are emerging tools for gender empowerment. Mobile banking, e-learning, and telemedicine platforms have expanded access to services for women, particularly in rural and underserved areas (GSMA, 2022). However, digital gender divides persist. Women are less likely to own mobile phones, access the internet, or participate in digital economies. Bridging these divides is critical to leveraging technology for inclusive development (UN-Women, 2025).

Community-based adaptation (CBA) strategies emphasize local knowledge and participatory planning. Women-led cooperatives and grassroots organizations often play vital roles in ecosystem restoration, water management, and food security. Supporting these initiatives with funding and policy recognition can enhance societal resilience. In Bangladesh, for instance, women's groups have been instrumental in managing flood risks and promoting sustainable agriculture.

Education and advocacy are foundational to transformative change. Gender-responsive curricula and public awareness campaigns can challenge stereotypes and foster a culture of equity. Integrating gender studies into environmental science, economics, and engineering programmes will prepare future leaders for inclusive decision-making. Capacity-building programmes for women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) are particularly crucial (UN-Women, 2025).

## Conclusion

Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but also a cornerstone of sustainable development. This paper has examined the theoretical underpinnings, historical evolution, governance frameworks, and forward-looking strategies that underscore the symbiotic relationship between gender equity and sustainability. Achieving inclusive and resilient societies requires dismantling patriarchal systems, investing in gender-sensitive policies, and embracing interdisciplinary innovation. As global challenges such as climate change and inequality intensify, centring gender in sustainable development is both a moral imperative and a strategic necessity. Efforts must now focus on translating commitments into action, ensuring that gender perspectives are not an afterthought, but a guiding principle in development planning. A future that is equitable, inclusive, and sustainable for all is only achievable through sustained political will, institutional accountability, and grassroots participation.

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