

# “A STUDY ON SUSTABLE GOVERNANCE THROUGH WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP”

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## ABSTRACT

Genuine inclusive participation in the self-governance of communal irrigation systems remains a challenge. This article analyses the mechanisms of participation in irrigation water users' associations (WUAs) with focus on women as leaders of those organizations by drawing on cases from a comparative, multicase mixed-method study in Ethiopia and Argentina. After having being a topic for decades in gender and development debates, in many irrigated areas of the world WUAs continue to be male dominated at all levels, especially in influential positions. Findings in this article suggest that despite large socio- economic and cultural differences, the current water management systems in both research locations reinforce problems of unequal gender participation; women have more obstacles and constraints in establishing equal access in membership, participation and decision making in irrigation management. The lack of inclusive participation and the low representation of women in leadership roles lead to WUAs being poorly rooted in their community of users. Incomplete social rootedness of WUAs jeopardizes their effectiveness and equality in water management and, as a result, affects longterm sustainability. Through analysis of empirical data of communal small-scale irrigation systems in both countries, the article discusses who participates, how and why they participate, and the reasons for low numbers of women in leadership roles within the WUAs. Finally, the article reflects on possible enabling conditions that could foster inclusive participation, increase the quantity and capacity of women in management and leadership roles, and the benefits this may bring to sustainable irrigation systems.

## KEYWORDS

Inclusive participation, agricultural irrigation, water users' associations, women's leadership, social rootedness.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The advancement of women in the world is intimately related to the country's progress. Just 25 years ago, there was a lot of evidence of gender discriminations in the jobs, in homes, and even in the high education. Women had to overcome these obstacles and pursue possibilities that would place them on an equal basis with man. The realization of human wants and ambitions is the primary goal of progress. There are many barriers such as food, clothing, shelter and employment facing by poor countries in the way of their progress. Every individual have the right to fulfill their ambitions for better life. Poverty and inequalities in the world increase the risk of environment and other crises. Sustainable development attempts to achieve peace between humanity and nature (Brundtland, 1987). It is highlighted in the World Bank's 2012 World Development Report: Gender Equality

and Development that it is necessary to reduce gender disparities for policymaking and development. The key areas of reducing gender inequality are: (1) minimizing the disparity between men and women in the society, (2) reducing the gender disparity in terms of production, pay, and financial prospects, (3) making decision about their life, and (4) reducing gender disparity from passed down through the generations. Humanity may achieve sustainable development that meets current demands without risking future generations' ability to meet their own demands (Brundtland, 1987). It addresses the demands of both men and women. Sustainable development has four interconnected aspects of development: economic, social, cultural, and environment preservation. Gender equality required a comprehensive and integrated approach, so that women can empower in the all aspects of development (Warth & Koparnova, 2012). In order to promote socioeconomic development and the accomplishment of the Sustainable development Goals, this is necessary to putting on elevating women to prominent roles. This strategy acknowledges reduce gender inequality and enhance the participation of women in the development activities. Empowering women is a process that includes both creating a non-discriminating environment for women and enhancing their ability to take charge of their lives; so that women can make necessary changes in the family and society. Collaborative actions are required by the government, community, and the non-government organizations. Equal participation of the women in the all sectors, policy areas, control in the resources and in the level of implementations of the policies, are required. Women in the leadership role is a development strategy in which women assume leadership positions and actively contribute to influencing and advancing a community's social, political, and economic development. In this strategy, women are not merely recipients of progress of the nation rather they play a role as leaders who equally contributed to the planning and decision- making. However, outside of academia, leadership in sustainable development is still primarily viewed as gender neutral. The example of this issue was seen in the almost completely male list of prior receipts of the World Sustainable Development Summit's Sustainable Development Award (Shinbrot et al., 2019). Women play a crucial role not only in the family, community, and in the society but also in the economy and politics. It is necessary to support laws that advance gender equality and give women more chance to forefront as the leaders; this new point of view recognise women's socioeconomic and political participation. Women led development is needed for the promoting economic growth, eliminate gender disparity, National progress, and for achieve Sustainable Development Goals. Women-led development is essential in Indian context because it has the capability to significantly boost growth, improve social well-being, encourage women's entrepreneurship and for achieving sustainable development; as it allows the women to actively participate in decision making, workforce, eliminates gender inequality.<sup>1</sup>

## OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- To assess the participation of women in leadership roles, within rural governance in Himachal Pradesh.
- To study the impact of government initiatives to promoting women's leadership roles.
- Environmental Stewardship & Climate Action: Women in leadership roles prioritize environmental, social,

and governance (ESG) issues, contributing to more ambitious climate goals. Their leadership in community resource management often results in better conservation, such as enhanced forest management, improved water sustainability, and effective waste reduction.

- **Equal Participation in Decision-Making (SDG 5):** A core goal is ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of political, economic, and public life. This includes breaking down barriers to entry in male-dominated fields.
- **Transformational and Ethical Leadership:** Women leaders often adopt a, collaborative, and team-oriented approach, fostering healthier, more productive work environments. They are more inclined to focus on long-term sustainability rather than just short-term financial gains.
- **Social Equity and Economic Development:** Promoting women leaders helps dismantle restrictive norms, reduces inequalities, and drives economic growth, potentially adding significant value to global GDP by ensuring policies benefit all members of society.
- **Strengthening Community Resilience:** Women are key agents in local, sustainable, and eco-friendly practices, and their empowerment strengthens community resilience against climate challenges.

**2.** These objectives are foundational to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as women's leadership is recognized as a necessary, and too often underutilized, catalyst for achieving holistic sustainability.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUNDS**

Sustainable governance through women's leadership has historical roots in women's roles as primary stewards of natural resources and agents of social change, evolving from informal, community-based environmentalism into formal, international policy frameworks. Historically, women have led grassroots movements—such as the Chipko movement in India—protecting ecosystems and driving social justice, which has laid the groundwork for modern sustainable development, characterized by a focus on long-term, community-oriented solutions rather than short-term gains.

**Grassroots & Community Stewardship:** Historically, women have been the primary managers of household resources (water, fuel, food) in many cultures, providing them with critical, localized knowledge about ecosystem management and sustainable practices.<sup>2</sup>

**Environmental Activism (Pre-1990s):** Women were early champions of ecological justice, often leading movements against environmental destruction, land rights, and advocating for community-based environmentalism, though these efforts were frequently under-recognized in environmental discourse.

**The Rio Earth Summit (1992):** A defining moment that recognized the instrumental role of women in environmental management and sustainable development.

**International Frameworks (2000s-Present):** The integration of gender equality into sustainable development was solidified by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and later, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable

Development (2015), which established that women's leadership is critical to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

## 2.1. Core Components of Women-Led Sustainable Governance

**Inclusive & Collaborative Style:** Women leaders often employ inclusive, participatory approaches to decision-making, emphasizing collaboration, empathy, and consensus-building, which are essential for managing complex environmental and social issues. **Long-Term Vision:** Research indicates women in leadership tend to prioritize long-term sustainability, intergenerational equity, and social responsibility over immediate profit, influencing both public policy and corporate strategies.

<sup>2</sup> <https://oaji.net/articles/2023/1201-1756382077.pdf>

**Environmental & Social Performance:** Increased representation of women on corporate boards and in government is positively linked to improved environmental performance (e.g., lower emissions, better waste management) and higher social responsibility (e.g., employee welfare, gender-sensitive policies).

## 2.2. Challenges and Structural Barriers

Despite the proven benefits, significant obstacles persist:

**Systemic Biases:** Patriarchal structures and deeply ingrained social norms continue to limit women's access to leadership, particularly in environmentally sensitive sectors like energy and construction.

**Lack of Representation:** Women remain underrepresented at the highest decision-making levels, with projections suggesting gender parity in political power is far off. **Intersecting Disparities:** Rural and Indigenous women, in particular, face dual challenges of marginalization and disproportionate impacts from environmental degradation, limiting their ability to exercise leadership.

Today, sustainable governance is increasingly viewed not just as an environmental issue but a gender-equity issue. The focus has shifted to promoting "gender-responsive governance," which includes strengthening women's participation in environmental policymaking, using gender quotas, and fostering networks to combat environmental degradation.

## 2.3. Government Initiatives for Women's Leadership Role in India

India has acknowledged the vital roles that women play in social advancement, economic success, and equal roles in achieving sustainable development. Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasised the importance of women's engagement in global development the G20 Summit in Bali. For removing the inequalities that currently limit the opportunities of women in education, employment, leadership roles etc. women led development is necessary in India. The Himachal Pradesh government has taken a number of steps to increase women's involvement in governance and leadership roles. One of the most important steps was 50% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (Department of Pachayati Raj, Government of Himachal Pradesh). Participation of women in local government has increased due to this initiative. In rural Himachal Pradesh women make substantial contribution to agriculture, the local economy, and community welfare.

However the representation in leadership roles had been constrained by many socio-cultural barriers like inadequate leadership training opportunities (Chaudhary & Sharma, 2019). In order to promote gender equality and encourage inclusive and sustainable development, leadership role of women at the grassroots level is essential. It is the key driver of rural development, economic empowerment, and for social change. Women especially for rural areas are continue to struggling to recognize the importance of remunerated talents and decision making, underlining the need of financial independence for women. Recognising the obstacles faced by women especially in rural areas government of India launched a number of transformative efforts to realize their potential for national development. One of the most significant initiatives has been made by the Gender disparity in the rural areas is the biggest obstacle in the leadership of women. It is due to following traditional social norms.<sup>3</sup>

- Women is not receiving quality education in rural areas due to lack of education institutions
- Job opportunities and wage disparity are constraints in the way of economic development of the women.
- Lack of awareness about the rights and provisions related to women.
- Vulnerability against women is the obstacle which restricts women to their growth.
- Male dominance in the leadership roles
- Poor healthcare services

#### **2.4.           Reviews of the Related Literature**

The review of related literature reveals that Subramaniam (2003) found the role of women in development and emphasised on developing abilities in the context of training and networking efforts. Capacity building and change can serve as a feasible way to promote courage and confidence among underprivileged women. Warth & Koparnova (2012) examined women's empowerment as a critical step to achieving gender equality and as a result, sustainable development. The study focused to the subject of what needs to be done for empowering women. Creating an enabling policy environment and strengthening women's ability as active agents of change for sustainable development. Gupta (2013) analysed the obstacles of women led entrepreneurs and shortcomings of policy making. Study found that the gender disparity was the biggest problem of entrepreneurial endeavours in India. Study highlighted that promoting factors of women led enterprises were educational achievements and women's income generating activities. Study suggested the need for modification in policy focus to address gender inequality and built leadership skills and professional abilities for women. Shinbrot et al (2019) investigated the barriers women faced for becoming leaders to achieve sustainable development goals. By qualitative analysis of the interviews of 120 women and men, found that: i). male dominance structures of the society were preventing women from becoming leaders. ii). some complicated and unseen factors like uncertainty, self-doubt, timidity, hesitancy etc. and also gender inequalities were hindering the leadership role of women. Chaudhary and Sharma (2019) examine women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in Himachal Pradesh, mainly focus on the scope, nature and difficulties faced

by women in rural governance. The study highlighted that the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, which reserve seats for women in PRIs and significantly increased their role in numerical participation in governance.

### **3. PARTICIPATION IN IRRIGATION AND GENDER EQUALITY**

Historically, barriers to participation, such as rules of entry, intrinsic social stratifications and customary norms have resulted in low participation of women in WUAs (for example in the Andes, as described by Bastidas, 2005; and in South Asia, as discussed by Meinzen-Dick and Zwarteveen, 1998). This happens even in those cases where women have a prominent role in agriculture and irrigation (Upadhayay, 2003). For many rural women, structural inequalities are mainly driven by embedded social relations of power and material inequalities, which are difficult to overcome (Morales and Harris, 2014; Vera Delgado, 2005). Socio-cultural and economic barriers prevent involvement in WUAs not only of women but also of other disadvantaged social groups (Harris, 2006). These systemic inequalities are then reproduced in the participatory mechanisms used by resource management institutions (Morinville and Harris, 2014), especially when those mechanisms fail to consider the existing “intra-group” social relations and power asymmetries (Agarwal, 2015) and the influence of contextual power dynamics on community organizations (Brisbois and de Loë, 2016; Morales and Harris, 2014).<sup>4</sup>

#### **3.1. Women in leadership of WUAs**

At the time of conducting research in both countries, the participation of women in leadership of WUAs was extremely low. Out of the 23 registered associations in the two kebeles in the highlands of Tigray, there were only two female-led WUAs (8.7%). In the lowlands, none of the 15 registered WUAs (by 2016) had a female abomay. Of the 142 WUAs in Mendoza Province, only two women were inspectoras (1.4%); and only one of them was validated in her position and re-elected (in 2018). Four illustrative cases of women in leadership in Tigray and Mendoza offer insights to women’s motivations and constraints to holding leadership positions in WUAs (see Box 1). The most frequently- mentioned reasons why women did not occupy leadership positions included: membership requirements (inclusion/exclusion factors); workload and time availability; education and technical training levels to perform water management work; the self and others’ perceptions of the capacity of women to lead WUAs; the (perceived and actual) physical and technical difficulties to do the work; and the social and power relations of gender persistent in the irrigation sector. These factors will be discussed next.<sup>4</sup> The fact that women in Tigray and Mendoza have significantly less independent membership in WUAs than men is a structural barrier for women willing to become WUA leaders. The next most typical reason mentioned by men for low female presence as leaders is lack of time due to the heavy domestic and production workloads of women. For example, in Tigray, male members of the WCs of the highlands said: “Women do not want to participate. They have a lot of work burden at home. It is difficult for them”. Another abomay of the lowlands also explained: “For women, being in the WC and coming to meetings is a burden. They don’t need to participate”. Although in these two locations women are clearly involved in most of the farming work and in

charge of most of the domestic responsibilities, some women indicated willingness to participate.

### 3.2. Discussion and conclusions: Opportunities for more women in leadership

Both in Mendoza and Tigray, WUAs are threatened by a series of factors and processes evolving due to demographic changes, political and economic instability, changes in land use, climate variability and loss of profitability in the agricultural sector. Nonetheless, in both places, WUAs have a strong legal mandate and represent most irrigation water users in their localities. By applying a gender perspective to the analysis of participation and leadership of WUAs, this article has identified gender differences and constraints to participation for women, how women are able to access leadership positions, and the challenges to stay in those positions. Findings show how legal factors (rules of entry), personal characteristics, technical dimensions of the irrigation management practice, and social interactions of power all lead to participation mechanisms presenting more challenges to women than to men. Participation of women in irrigation system management is directly linked to their participation in farming, which is constrained by cultural norms and traditions, but also by heavier domestic workloads. This has been described by the scholarship on gender and irrigation (for example, Harris, 2006 Centrone et al., 2017; Lefore et al., 2017) and confirmed by our findings of Tigray and Mendoza.<sup>5</sup>

## 4. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The following are the findings of this paper;

- It is found that majority of the women respondents were belonging to the middle age group that is 31-45 years which are active in grassroot politics. Education level of women Pradhan were good as there was no illiterate respondents find. And basic school education (metric and +2) were completed by the respondents.
- 68% were elected first time as Pradhan which means new entrants into leadership position.
- 95% women respondents were elected through reserved seats which indicating the importance of reservation policy at grassroot level.
- Community and family influence were seen in the women contested in election, which was seen in the response of 56% respondents. While 43% contested elections on their own initiatives.
- Majority (62%) of respondents reported independently decision making while 38% shows partial autonomy in leadership roles. 77% felt accepted by the community as leader but 23% still face socio cultural resistance.
- Training for leadership or capacity building is compulsory for elected PRIs, all the respondents' women Pradhan attended these training programme.

## 5. CONCLUSION

To promote socioeconomic growth and to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, it is vital to elevate women to prominent positions. Women must participate equally in all sectors and policy areas, as well as have control over resources and the level of policy execution. The process in which women occupy in leadership roles and actively contribute to social, economic and political success is called women led development. Women led development is required to promote economic progress, eradicate gender disparities, and meet the Sustainable Development Goals especially leadership role of women at the grassroots level. \ However, other issues such as gender inequality, education, and socio-economic, political status continue to be difficult to address. To overcome these barriers to women-led development, quality education, health services, women's safety should be prioritized, employment opportunities should be raised.

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