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Women, environment and development in the Tribal district of Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh, India

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Abstract
The intersection of women, the environment, and development produces a complex sociological situation. Women often bore the brunt of environmental degradation because of their reliance on natural resources for livelihoods such as agriculture, forestry, and water management. However, their contributions to sustainable practices and local knowledge are typically underestimated or overlooked in official development frameworks. Himachal Pradesh's tribal region has a substantial hydropower potential. Kinnaur has a considerable number of hydroelectric power projects, both large and minor. Hydroelectric project development has had a substantial impact on the local population's livelihood.
It is vital to consider women's perspectives and awareness of the consequences of hydroelectric power projects. Women rely more on their physical environment, shared property resources, kinship, and other social ties than men. The goal of this study is to highlight how women's experiences and outcomes in environmental governance and sustainable development practices are influenced by developmental activities and responses to environmental degradation.

Keywords: Women, gender dynamics, environmental sustainability, hydroelectric power projects

Introduction
The concept of "environment" stems from the French word “environner”, meaning "to surround," and represents the comprehensive system of water, air, and land, including the interactions among these elements and their connections to humans, other organisms, and property. Although historically considered the "weaker sex," women have long carried significant responsibility for the management and conservation of natural resources. Women globally take a central role in the stewardship of resources, from preserving water sources to protecting forests (Boserup, 1970) [3]. The relationship between women and the environment gained increased attention in the 1970s, notably with Ester Boserup's work, “Woman’s Role in Economic Development”. By the 1980s, policymakers began acknowledging women’s essential contributions to environmental and resource management, integrating gender perspectives into policy frameworks (Boserup, 1970) [3].
In 1991, the World Bank highlighted that "women play an essential role in the management of natural resources, including soil, water, forests, and energy," emphasizing their deep knowledge of their environment (World Bank, 1991). Research reveals that women’s unique connection to nature and their traditional knowledge of natural resources, including the medicinal uses of forest products, positions them as crucial actors in promoting conservation and sustainability. However, as deforestation accelerates, this generational knowledge is increasingly at risk. Women, particularly those in forested and tribal regions of India, often feel the impacts of environmental degradation most directly, given that many rely on forests for both livelihood and household resources. Approximately two to three million people in these areas depend on firewood collection, with women shouldering 90% of this labor (Agarwal, 1992) [1]. Collecting forest products has historically provided women with supplemental income, nutrition, and medicinal resources, but they frequently face exploitation by intermediaries and profiteers within these largely non-monetized economies (Agarwal, 1992) [1].
Environmental degradation disproportionately impacts women due to their close interactions with nature in their roles as caregivers and community managers. They often bear the burden of degraded surroundings, poor infrastructure, and limited resources.

In India, women have historically led conservation efforts, bringing valuable perspectives on environmental issues based on their lived experiences. For economically marginalized women, the need for environmental preservation aligns with their struggle for survival, demonstrating the compatibility of ecological sustainability and economic resilience (Shiva, 1988) [6]. Through collective efforts, such as rehabilitating degraded lands with traditional farming methods, women in India have effectively addressed challenges like soil erosion and water management, reinforcing their vital role in sustainable development.

Literature review on Role of Women in Conservation of Environment in India

Environmentalists play a critical role in advancing environmental protection and advocacy, often dedicating themselves to this cause even when others prioritize personal comfort over ecological well-being. Their commitment has contributed significantly to environmental preservation and has a widespread impact on society. In India, the environmental protection movement dates back to the Khejrali movement and gained traction through subsequent efforts like the Chipko movement, Appiko movement, Save Silent Valley movement, and Narmada Bachao Andolan. A notable trend in Indian environmental activism is the active involvement of women, Adivasis, and economically disadvantaged groups (Guha, 2013) [5].

The close relationship between women and the environment is a key feature of this movement. Ecofeminism, a theoretical approach bridging ecological ethics and feminism, explores the interconnectedness between environmental degradation and gender-based oppression. This framework highlights how women, due to their traditional roles as farmers and gatherers of water and firewood, develop a deep connection to their natural surroundings. This link makes women, children, and marginalized groups particularly vulnerable to the impacts of environmental degradation and natural disasters (Shiva, 1988) [6]. Consequently, women often show greater involvement in environmental activism, as their livelihoods and well-being are more directly influenced by ecological health than men's (Agarwal, 1992) [1].

Women have participated in numerous government and non-governmental initiatives focused on forestry and environmental protection, underscoring their critical role in advocating for sustainable environmental practices (Bandyopadhyay & Shiva, 1988) [2].

Hydroelectric Power Development in Himachal Pradesh

India's Himalayan states hold the majority of the country's hydroelectric potential, which can significantly boost human development. Located in the western Himalayas, Himachal Pradesh is known as Dev Bhumi, or "The Abode of Gods," and holds approximately 25% of India's hydroelectric capacity, making it a key state for hydropower. Major rivers flowing through Himachal Pradesh include the Yamuna, Beas, Ravi, and Chenab, establishing it as a powerhouse for electricity generation. Several hydroelectric projects are distributed across Himachal Pradesh, with a concentration in the Satluj basin within the Kinnaur district. Positioned in the northwestern part of the state, Kinnaur is a tribal region extensively drained by the Satluj River. Originating in Tibet, the Satluj enters India through Khab in Kinnaur and contributes notably to the state's hydropower resources. Kinnaur's eastern location within Himachal Pradesh underscores its reputation for significant hydropower potential. According to Himalayan Niti Abhiyan (2015), the hydropower capacity of the Satluj and its tributaries has been estimated at 9,396.75 MW, with 2,832.75 MW already harnessed. In response to this potential, the Himachal Pradesh government has proposed over 30 hydroelectric projects along the Satluj river basin and its tributaries, ranging from micro-scale to large-scale installations. Most of these initiatives are run-of-the-river (ROR) projects.

Materials and Methods

The current study was conducted in the villages surrounding four major hydroelectric power projects in the Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh, focusing on women's perceptions of the environmental impacts of these projects. Utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods, the research is based on primary data collected specifically for this purpose.

As an exploratory study, a structured interview schedule was developed to assess respondents' views on the effects of hydroelectric power projects in the Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh. To enhance the precision, accuracy, and flexibility of the questions, the interview schedule underwent pre-testing and included several open-ended questions. The study also incorporated case studies and narratives to enrich the research.

Results and Discussion

The people of Kinnaur, like many tribal communities in India, deeply rely on their land and forests for sustenance and daily life. Given that much of Kinnaur's land is classified as forest, expanding hydroelectric projects in the state has primarily affected lands along river basins. These lands and forests are not only vital to Kinnaur's economy and food sources, but they also hold immense cultural importance. The forests provide firewood for cooking, timber for building, and warmth during the winter, serving as lifelines for the tribal community. However, forest diversion due to development threatens their traditional way of life. The Kinnaur people have maintained a unique and symbiotic relationship with nature since ancient times, with customary rights to the land and forests. Their cultural practices reflect a deep reverence for the natural environment, visible in regional fairs and festivals celebrating mountains, springs, lakes, and vegetation. As stewards of nature, the people of Kinnaur hold a vital role in its preservation, which becomes all the more crucial in the face of contemporary environmental exploitation in the name of progress.

Located in seismic zone 4, Kinnaur is highly vulnerable to earthquakes. Activities like constructing high dams, tunneling for river diversions, and extensive blasting heighten the risks of landslides, deforestation, and the depletion of natural springs, endangering forests and fertile lands. Massive hydropower projects pose significant environmental threats and economic costs, and have sparked allegations of infringing upon the indigenous community's constitutional rights. Locals have cited violations of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, and have organized to resist these developments.

In the past decade, there have been large-scale protests against hydroelectric projects. In Tapri, Kinnaur, construction companies faced accusations of encroaching on

private lands, leading to the Jail Bharo Andolan (Mass Imprisonment Movement). Since 2007, nearby communities like Meeru Changon and Urni have opposed hydropower projects for their harmful effects on horticultural crops, and villagers have reported the loss of irrigation routes, increasing landslide vulnerability, and erosion. Deforestation and blasting along the Hindustan-Tibet Highway have dried up natural water sources, while newly built homes are now marked by cracks. This has also harmed Kinnaur's prized tree species like cholgoza, apple, and cedrus deodara, destabilizing the local economy and increasing natural disasters.

Women and Environment in Kinnaur

Women in Kinnaur play an active role in environmental conservation. They handle all domestic and household responsibilities, including caring for cattle, which creates a strong dependence on the forest. They collect forest residues, leaves, and grass to feed the cattle and gather wood for household use. Women also harvest various herbs for medicinal purposes, and they collect flowers from the forest for religious worship of their local deities. Additionally, they collect wild mushrooms, which are unique to the Himalayan region and hold significant economic value.

Due to this deep reliance on the forest and environment, women in Kinnaur are instrumental in protecting the area's natural resources. Women from across Kinnaur are engaged in environmental protection movements, actively participating in protests from past to present. Men in Kinnaur recognize and support their involvement in these efforts. In each village, women have formed organizations known as 'Mahila Mandals' dedicated to environmental activism. These groups organize rallies and protests, demonstrating against hydropower projects that threaten their natural surroundings. They have led various demonstrations against hydroelectric power projects, notably in the district headquarters, Recong-Peo, and continue to champion the preservation of Kinnaur's environment. A large number of women in Kinnaur actively participated in the resistance movement in 2007. One of the women respondents, who was 76 years old, narrated her story: "During the arrival of the Nathpa Jhakri project in Kinnaur, people from nearby villages and the lower parts of Kinnaur demonstrated their protest against the construction of the hydroelectric power project. I, along with many women from my village, participated in that protest for months. Women from every family joined the protest movement against the construction of hydroelectric power projects to safeguard our environment."

One of the presidents of the 'Mahila Mandal' explained that women in Kinnaur, being more connected to and dependent on the region's natural resources, consistently take part in environmental conservation. The Mahila Mandals also organize tree plantation drives and cleaning drives to protect Kinnaur's environment. Thus, the women of Kinnaur are essential leaders in the environmental protection movement.

Conclusion

Women in Kinnaur have consistently played a crucial role in environmental protection and are well-positioned to make significant contributions to family management. They have long been central to meeting household and community energy needs. However, women have traditionally been excluded from decision-making processes, with limited access to education and authority, which has affected their societal status. This imbalance has impacted their income, nutrition, health, social networks, and domestic knowledge. With their close connection to nature, women are often more attuned to environmental issues. As primary users of resources, it is important to include their perspectives in planning and implementing environmental conservation initiatives. It is essential to consider women's perspectives before planning any developmental project in any area. Therefore, the government should include women in the decision-making process in every developmental initiative.

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