



THE CHIPKO MOVEMENT AND GENDER EQUALITY: GRASSROOT ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM AS A PATHWAY TO SDG 5 IN TWENTY FIRST CENTURY INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The Chipko Movement, which emerged in Uttarakhand in the early 1970s, is a landmark example of grassroots environmental activism. This paper examines its significance through the lens of gender equality and UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5). It argues that participation of women in forest conservation challenged patriarchal structures, redefined development and promoted gender-responsive sustainability. Focusing on leaders such as Gaura Devi, Vimla Bahuguna, and Bachni Devi, the study explores women's environmental stewardship and decision-making roles. It also critically examines Chipko's association with ecofeminism and concludes that its legacy offers valuable lessons for gender-responsive forest governance, ecological knowledge and environmental policymaking

KEYWORDS: *Chipko Movement, Gender Equality, SDG 5, Ecofeminism, Environmental Activism, Sustainable Development.*

1.INTRODUCTION

The world today faces two major crises simultaneously: environmental degradation and gender inequality. These challenges are deeply connected and solving one requires addressing the other. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. However, reaching this goal remains difficult, especially in societies where patriarchal traditions, economic disadvantage and environmental damage combine to keep women in subordinate positions. In this context, historical movements of resistance take on new meaning. The Chipko Movement, which began in the Garhwal Himalayas of Uttarakhand in the early 1970s, stands as one of the most powerful examples of women-led environmental activism in the developing world. The now famous images of Garhwali women embracing trees to prevent commercial logging have come to symbolise grassroots opposition to destructive development models.

However, the Chipko Movement offers more than just environmental lessons. It provides valuable insights into how women's participation in collective action can advance gender equality. This paper argues that the importance of Chipko movement goes beyond forest protection to include fundamental issues of women's agency, decision-making power and the recognition of women's knowledge in environmental governance. By examining the movement's history, the conditions that enabled women's leadership, and its lasting impact, this paper identifies pathways through which grassroots environmental movements can contribute to achieving gender equality in the twenty-first century.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND ORIGINS OF THE CHIPKO MOVEMENT

The Chipko Movement did not appear suddenly. It grew from a long tradition of community resistance against the commercial exploitation of forests in the Himalayan region. It also drew inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent protest, which had shaped India's struggle for independence.

The immediate trigger for the movement came in the early 1970s when the Forest Department decided to allot forest land in the Garhwal region to a sports goods manufacturer for commercial logging. This decision threatened the forests that local communities depended on for their survival.

The movement officially began in 1973 in Uttarakhand (then part of Uttar Pradesh). Local communities organised against commercial tree-felling, which was causing forest degradation and increasing the risk of natural disasters. The movement had clear demands that is ending the contract system of tree-felling and establish community rights over forest management and use. The goal was to develop local economies through small-scale forest based industries while protecting the environment to ensure adequate water and biomass for household needs.

The Reni Incident

The event that came to define the movement occurred in March 1974 in the village of Reni. On March 25, 1974, Gaura Devi, who was the elected leader of the Mahila Mangal Dal (women's welfare association), led 27 other women to protect their community forest from government-contracted lumbermen. When the contractors arrived to cut trees, the women confronted them and embraced the trees to prevent their felling. This simple yet powerful act of resistance became the defining moment of the Chipko Movement.



Why Women Led the Movement

Women's large-scale participation in the movement was shaped by specific socio-economic conditions. Men from the region had migrated to cities in search of employment, leaving women responsible for managing household resources. Women collected fuelwood, fodder and water from the forests. This direct dependence meant that women were the first to experience the effects of deforestation, and consequently, the most motivated to resist it.

The movement showed how environmental issues are often deeply personal for women. When forests are destroyed, women's workload increases as they must travel farther to collect basic necessities. Their participation in the Chipko Movement was therefore not abstract environmentalism but a practical fight for survival.

3. WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP IN THE CHIPKO MOVEMENT

3.1 The Extent of Women's Involvement

Women were not simply helpers in the Chipko Movement; they were its backbone and its most visible face. Research shows that women played a critical role not only as active participants but also as leaders and strategists. Their involvement challenged traditional gender roles and empowered them to assert their rights.

The leadership of women like Gaura Devi, who led the first tree-hugging protest in Reni, demonstrates the transformative power of women's collective action. Other iconic women leaders emerged, including Suraksha Devi, Sudesha Devi and Bachni Devi. These women, despite living in a deeply patriarchal society, assumed leadership positions and forced their way into decision-making spaces.

The movement also benefited from women who worked behind the scenes. Vimla Bahuguna, wife of the internationally known Chipko leader Sunderlal Bahuguna, was described by scholar Madhu Kishwar as "a full partner with her husband in the Chipko movement." Though she preferred to remain in her husband's shadow, she was his pillar of strength and inspiration. Her life story illustrates the personal transformation that the movement enabled. Born in 1932 in Tehri, she joined the Kasturba Mahila Utthan Mandal in 1950 and was deeply influenced by Sarla Behn, who inspired her to dedicate her life to serving the less privileged. She was instrumental in mobilising women for the Chipko Movement, turning tree-hugging into a global symbol of resistance.

3.2 How Women were Mobilised

The Chipko Movement used a range of nonviolent techniques rooted in Gandhi's concept of satyagraha, including fasting, protests and tying sacred threads around trees. The movement's ability to mobilise communities through peaceful means inspired many environmental movements across the globe.

Women in the movement shared childcare responsibilities, which enabled their active participation in protests, campaigns and advocacy for forest conservation. Their deep connection with the land and understanding the impact of deforestation brought attention to critical environmental issues while challenging traditional gender roles and inspiring other women to join and lead.

The movement also used alternative forms of collective action, strengthening unity through art forms, folklore, slogans and parallel campaigning. These elements combined to create a powerful force that challenged established norms and demanded accountability from authorities.

3.3 Scholarly Debates and Critiques

While the Chipko Movement is often celebrated as a women's movement, scholars have offered nuanced critiques. Historian Shekhar Pathak has argued that the "ecological and feminist form of Chipko was invented" in 1977-79, suggesting that the movement's feminist image was constructed later rather than inherent. According to Pathak, this shift occurred when Sunderlal Bahuguna demanded a complete ban on tree felling based on his deep ecology perspective and when Vandana Shiva highlighted a single incident to create a feminist narrative without sufficient context.

In her 1988 book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, Shiva presented Bachni Devi as protesting against her husband, whom she described as contractor Sunderlal Saklani, portraying it as a gender conflict. However, historical records show that the movement involved collaboration between men and women. According to Pathak's book, Bachni Devi's husband was not Saklani but Bakhtawar Singh, a village head. Dhoom Singh Negi, a Chipko leader present at the protest, stated that it was Singh who had alerted villagers about Saklani's plan to fell trees.

The "gender conflict" narrative has also been rejected by Gaura Devi of Reni, one of Chipko's most famous figures. She is quoted as saying, "We have no quarrel with anybody." She acknowledged that large-scale women's participation was due to men migrating for jobs. These scholarly debates highlight the complexity of interpreting the Chipko Movement through contemporary feminist frameworks. The movement was not explicitly framed as feminist by its participants; rather, it was rooted in livelihood concerns, community survival and the assertion of traditional rights over forest resources.



4. ECOFEMINISM AND THE CHIPKO MOVEMENT

4.1 Theoretical Foundations

The Chipko Movement has been central to the development of ecofeminist thought, particularly in the Global South. Ecofeminism is a theoretical framework that sees a connection between the domination of women and the domination of nature, arguing that both stem from patriarchal power structures. The movement has been described as one of the first environmental activism efforts that mobilised rural women in the 1970s, and one of the first movements that could be classified as ecofeminist.

Women in this significant environmental movement took the lead in organising, opposing and rethinking development in ways that challenged both profit-driven and patriarchal structures. The Chipko Movement represents an ecological initiative driven by women's concerns about forest destruction, which evolved into broader ecological awareness to protect forest areas.

4.2 The Ethics of Care and Environmental Justice

The connection of Chipko movement to ecofeminism and the ethics of care has been extensively analysed by scholars. The movement's emphasis on the interconnectedness of human well-being and environmental health, its prioritisation of community survival over profit and its nonviolent methods rooted in Gandhian philosophy all align with ecofeminist principles.

The movement highlighted the importance of what came to be known as the "five Fs"-food for survival, fodder for animals, fibre for clothing, fuel for cooking and fertiliser for agriculture, that come from healthy forests. This understanding of essential role of ecosystem in sustaining human life reflects a perspective that values care, sustenance and community well-being over extraction and profit.

4.3 Critiques and Debates

Despite its significance for ecofeminist thought, the Chipko Movement has also faced criticism from scholars who question the essentialist assumptions underlying some ecofeminist interpretations. Some scholars argue that the movement was "a joint struggle based on gender collaboration and not based on gender conflicts." This perspective emphasises that the movement's strength lay in its collaborative nature, bringing together men, women and children in a common cause.

The characterisation of movement as ecofeminist has also been complicated by the recognition that women's participation was driven as much by practical necessity as by ideological commitment. This does not diminish the movement's significance for gender equality but rather situates it within the material conditions that shape lives of women.

5. THE CHIPKO MOVEMENT AND SDG 5: PATHWAYS TO GENDER EQUALITY

5.1 Women's Participation in Decision-Making

SDG Target 5.5 aims to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life. The Chipko Movement provides a compelling example of how grassroots mobilisation can enable women's participation in decision-making processes from which they have historically been excluded.

The women of Chipko, by organising, protesting and advocating for forest conservation, effectively inserted themselves into decision-making spaces traditionally dominated by men. Their actions forced authorities to consider women's perspectives on forest management and development. The movement demonstrated that when women organise collectively around issues that directly affect their lives, they can challenge entrenched power structures and demand accountability.

5.2 Recognition of Women's Contributions to Environmental Stewardship

SDG Target 5.a calls for reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, including access to ownership and control over land and other property. The Chipko Movement highlighted the critical role women play in environmental stewardship and natural resource management.

The emphasis of Chipko movement on the "five Fs" underscored women's dependence on forest resources for household subsistence and their deep knowledge of sustainable resource use. By foregrounding women's relationship with forests, the movement challenged the marginalisation of women's knowledge and labour in environmental governance. It demonstrated that women are not merely victims of environmental degradation but active agents of conservation and sustainable development.

The 2022 World Values Survey for India provides contemporary evidence of women's greater concern for environmental protection: 61% of women support environmental protection even at the cost of economic growth, compared to 55% of men. This suggests that the environmental stewardship orientation that characterised the Chipko Movement remains relevant to understanding women's relationship with the environment in contemporary India.

5.3 Gender-Responsive Policy Frameworks

SDG Target 5.c calls for the adoption and strengthening of sound policies and enforceable legislation for promoting gender equality and empowering all women and girls. The Chipko Movement contributed to policy reforms that have implications for gender-responsive environmental governance.



The movement led to key reforms in forest policy for the Himalayan states of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, and later contributed to reforms in the National Forest Policy. While these reforms did not explicitly address gender equality, they created conditions for greater community participation in forest management, which in turn opened spaces for women's involvement.

The movement also contributed to the recognition of women's traditional ecological knowledge and the importance of integrating gender perspectives into environmental policy. As scholars have argued, gender-responsive approaches are essential to achieving sustainable development and equal environmental outcomes.

5.4 Empowerment Through Collective Action

Beyond specific policy outcomes, the Chipko Movement contributed to women's empowerment through the experience of collective action itself. Research reveals that women's involvement in the movement challenged traditional gender roles and empowered them to assert their rights and interests. The movement created conditions for women to develop leadership skills, build solidarity and gain confidence in their ability to effect change.

The movement also demonstrated the power of grassroots activism in advancing gender equality. As a testament to the power of grassroots activism, the enduring message of Chipko movement serves as a call for sustainable development and climate action through women's empowerment, ecological protection, and community resilience.

6. CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE AND PATHWAYS FORWARD

6.1 Lessons for Today's Environmental Activism

The Chipko Movement offers enduring lessons for contemporary environmental activism and gender equality efforts.

First, it demonstrates the importance of grounding environmental activism in the lived experiences and material conditions of communities. The women of Chipko were not abstract environmentalists; they were women whose survival depended on the forests they sought to protect.

Second, the movement illustrates the power of nonviolent resistance in challenging entrenched power structures. The tactic of hugging trees simple, symbolic and powerful captured global attention and generated solidarity across boundaries.

Third, the movement shows that women's environmental activism can have transformative effects on gender relations, even when not explicitly framed as feminist. By organising, leading and demanding accountability, the women of Chipko challenged patriarchal norms and created new possibilities for women's participation in public life.

6.2 Practical Pathways to Achieving SDG 5

Drawing on the lessons of the Chipko Movement, this paper identifies several pathways through which contemporary efforts can advance SDG 5:

First, integrate gender perspectives into environmental policy and governance. This includes recognising women's traditional ecological knowledge, ensuring women's participation in decision-making bodies related to natural resource management and adopting gender-responsive approaches to environmental conservation.

Second, support women's grassroots organisations and movements. The Chipko Movement emerged from community-based organising, not from top-down interventions. Supporting women's collective action at the grassroots level can create conditions for empowerment and social transformation.

Third, recognise women's contributions to environmental stewardship in development frameworks. As the Chipko movement demonstrated, women are not merely beneficiaries of environmental conservation but active agents of sustainable development.

Fourth, adopt gender-responsive approaches to climate action and sustainable development. The emphasis of Chipko movement on the interconnectedness of human well-being and environmental health remains relevant to contemporary efforts to address climate change and achieve sustainable development.

7. CONCLUSION

The Chipko Movement, though rooted in a specific time and place, offers profound insights into the relationship between environmental activism and gender equality. While the movement was not explicitly framed as a feminist movement, its effects - the empowerment of women, the challenging of patriarchal norms and the recognition of women's knowledge and agency - are undeniably aligned with the objectives of SDG 5.

The movement demonstrates that women's participation in collective action can have transformative effects on gender relations, even when the immediate focus is on livelihood concerns and community survival. It shows that grassroots mobilisation can enable women to challenge entrenched power structures, develop leadership skills and demand accountability from authorities.



As the world grapples with the intersecting crises of climate change, environmental degradation and gender inequality, the Chipko Movement offers enduring lessons for achieving SDG 5. By recognising women's contributions to environmental stewardship, supporting women's grassroots organising, and integrating gender perspectives into environmental policy, we can build on the legacy of Chipko to create a more just and sustainable future. The findings emphasise the need for comprehensive strategies that address both gender inequality and environmental challenges to achieve social justice and long-term sustainability.

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