
A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE ECOFEMINIST PERSPECTIVE IN THE BANNI GRASSLAND OF INDIA

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Abstract: *The Banni grasslands of Kutch, India, constitute a fragile and diverse ecosystem that faces numerous threats to its existence requiring prompt conservation measures. In the context of conservation efforts, the ecofeminist perspective advocates for the active involvement of women, recognising their unique relationship with nature and the potential for gender-sensitive solutions. This research paper employs an empirical study to provide a critical analysis of the conservation of Banni grassland and reveals an appalling absence of women's participation and representation, which undermines the effectiveness and sustainability of these efforts. Using a critical ecofeminist lens to examine the underlying causes of this exclusion, this research paper delves into the prevalent socio-cultural norms and gender roles that marginalise women by limiting their access to resources, decision-making forums, and knowledge-sharing platforms. This study calls for developing a more holistic and sustainable approach to the preservation of the Banni grasslands by incorporating ecofeminism into conservation measures, thereby enhancing the well-being of the ecosystem and the dependent communities.*

Keywords: *Desertification; Ecofeminism; Grasslands; Sustainable development; Women*

Introduction

Gender equality is closely linked to environmental performance as it fosters inclusive and sustainable development. When women are empowered and have equal access to education, resources, and decision-making, their active involvement in environmental initiatives leads to better environmental outcomes. Governments have collaborated over the past two decades to establish international mandates ensuring that gender

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equality and the empowerment of women are central to environmental decision-making and sustainable development (IUCN, 2013). Yet huge gaps exist when it comes to gender inclusion in the environmental space.

Marx had already acknowledged that it was possible for humanity to become estranged from their constructed reality, even though they created it. However, they cannot be separated from their natural environments under any circumstances (Marx & Engels, 2009). Furthermore, there is a gendered aspect to this alienation, meaning that women feel more estranged from nature when it comes to the question of preserving it (Foster, 2000, p. 63-73). This study explores the correlations between the degradation of Banni grasslands and women's conservation consciousness and participation in restoring it. This paper focuses specifically on women's participation patterns and perceptions of the issue.

Research Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

A mixed/integrative method approach is used to carry out this research. An inductive/thematic analysis is done with quantitative analysis within a critical ecofeminist theory. Crucially, in this research article, the qualitative thematic approach is complemented by theory-informed quantitative analysis. The use of a distinct theoretical paradigm derived from existing literature aided in the development of the study's themes. This research article employs a data collection technique that involves the administration of a survey to a sample of 200 participants (n=200), as well as conducting semi-structured interviews with 60 key informants (n=60). The secondary sources of data involve relevant reports of the concerned organisations, non-governmental agencies involved and the information drawn through the Right to Information (RTIs) from governmental agencies.

Theoretical framework: Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is a philosophical and social movement that emerged in the late 20th century, bringing together environmentalism and feminism in a powerful alliance. Ecofeminism is a multidisciplinary critical theory that says environmental and women's problems are linked because women and nature are seen as commodities in a society dominated by men. An ecofeminist viewpoint is "structurally pluralistic, inclusive, and contextualist;" it highlights, by illustration, the importance of context in making sense of sexist and naturist behaviour (Warren, 1987). Nature is a feminist issue because comprehension of nature and environmental issues helps one to comprehend how and why women's oppression is connected to the unjustified dominance or exploitation of nature. Ecological feminism differs from the other existing forms of feminism in that it contains an ecological perspective relating to women's and nature's oppression (Warren, 1987).

Conversely, ecofeminism also emphasises the crucial role women play as environmental stewards and activists. Women have been at the forefront of many grassroots movements such as the Chipko movement in the Himalayas (Guha, 1989), advocating for sustainable practices, conservation, and social justice. Their involvement has proven

instrumental in promoting community resilience and fostering environmentally responsible practices.

Vandana Shiva represents ecofeminism in India. Her ecofeminist critique of the development model and its environmental impacts is both socialist and radical. She cites the experiences of women in the 1970s Chipko movement in the Garhwal Himalayas, where women fought for forest protection and regeneration (Mies et al., 2022, p.246-252). Shiva (1988) criticises Western, patriarchal, and colonial science and technology as violent and perpetuating violence against women and nature. This growth paradigm departs from traditional Indian philosophy, which views prakriti as the "feminine principle" that creates all life. Nature has been exploited cruelly under the guise of growth, and the feminine principles have been reduced to a "resource" instead of an active, creative, and sacred force. This marginalises, devalues, displaces, and finally disregards women. Modern science diminished women's particular awareness of nature and their reliance on it for "staying alive". Women's empowerment and environmental conservation are both bolstered when they are given greater involvement in environmental projects and initiatives (Krishna, 2014). According to Bina Agarwal (1992), the bonds between women to the environment are socially and historically varied. Women, particularly in impoverished rural homes, are both victims of environmental deterioration and active participants in environmental conservation and regeneration initiatives. The leading cause of the class-gender effect of environmental degradation has been a decline in community-owned resources and a decrease in traditional knowledge (Kulkarni, 1983).

Substantially a large body of literature on the gender-climate relationship provides significant links for enhancing climate change resilience, adaptation, and mitigation by recognising women as active agents (Global Gender and Climate Alliance, 2016; UNCCD, 2006; Kumar et al., 2020; Rainard et al., 2023). Recognising the patterns of access and interactions with nature by gender norms, socioeconomic conditions, division of labour (Gilbert, 1994), and patriarchal systems (Krishna, 2014) and incorporating them into the policy framework is held as a prerequisite for achieving sustainable development. Numerous studies on the effects of climate change emphasise qualitative and ecofeminist methodologies to highlight the disproportionate impact on women and advocate strengthening women's role in mitigating this impact (Agarwal, 1992; Gaard, 1993; Griffin, 1978). For sustainable development, mainly Sustainable Development Goals 13 and 15, minimising the skewed role of gender in environmental management and conservation (Ford et al., 2010) is viewed as an unavoidable practical solution.

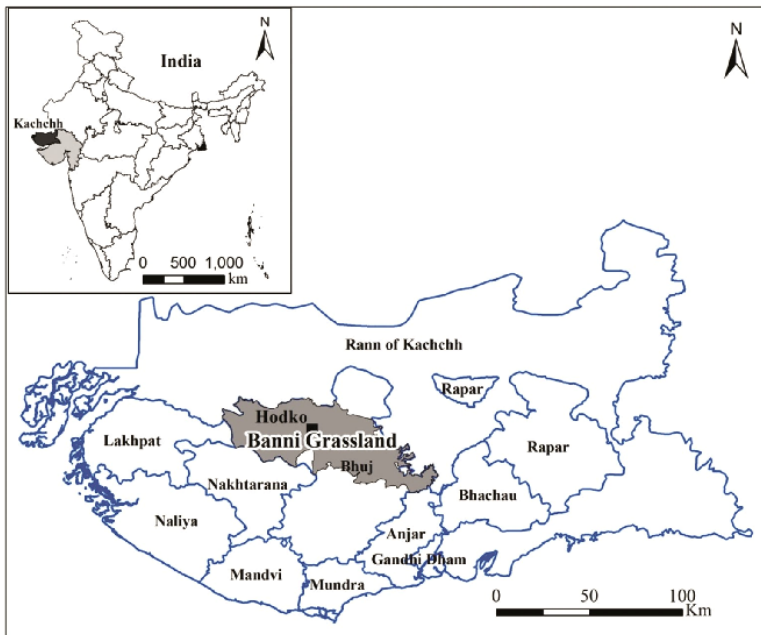
Women and Grasslands Conservation: A study in Banni

To examine women and their participation and awareness of conserving grassland, we have conducted an empirical study in the Banni grasslands of Kutch (Figure 1). The Banni Grasslands, the finest grassland and pastureland in Asia, are located in Gujarat's westernmost region. These grasslands account for about 2.55% of Gujarat's total degraded land (Space Application Center, 2021). Due to recurrent droughts and human activity, these grasslands have experienced land degradation in recent decades (Pillai et

al., 2018). The main factors for the degradation of the Banni grasslands involve overgrazing, plantation of invasive species *Prosopis juliflora* (Singh, 2020), climate change, urbanisation, transport, and industry (The Gujarat Ecology Commission, 2008). Various reports and studies show that pastoralist activities harm both Banni grassland and the women who labour on it. Overgrazing is one of the primary causes of Banni grassland deterioration (Manjunatha et al., 2022). The most common invasive species, *juliflora*, is spread via grazing livestock.

This study was carried out in Banni grassland in the Kutch district of India. There are 19 village panchayats and more than 20 ethnic communities.

Figure 1. Banni grasslands



Source: Location of Banni (Machival et al., 2018)

This study looks at awareness among women and their participation in managing Banni grasslands. It does this by using both primary and secondary research methods. To obtain comprehensive information on social realities, the technique used both open-ended and closed-ended structured and unstructured interviews and a comprehensive survey. The direct interactions with residents eliminated the biases that could arise in pure theoretical and survey-based data collection. Data were acquired through fieldwork employing both qualitative and quantitative approaches such as participant and quasi-participant observation, survey, and open-ended interviews with key informants. The primary informants mainly consisted of traditional village leaders—

men and women of varying ages dependent on livestock for livelihood and involved in domestic water management. The research was conducted in 12 villages in the Kutch district of Gujarat over five months, from September 2022 to January 2023. The sample size for the survey was 200. The sample size for the interview (structured or unstructured) consisted of 60 respondents. The qualitative data analysis followed inductive thematic analysis using Delve and the quantitative data analysis was done using Microsoft Excel software. The data collection was supplemented by the information obtained through Right-to-Information (RTI) collected from the government agency, the National Bank for Agriculture Development (NABARD), and other non-government organisations.

Primarily, this study focused on the gendered aspects of managing and restoring Banni grassland. The main themes of the study comprise awareness of women, their dependence on grassland for livelihood and their participation in grassland management. Most of the information gathered was about how women and men see and experience grassland degradation.

Occupational Profile: Women

In the study with a sample size of 200, 48% of respondents were female. In interviews, 35% of the sample size of 60 consisted of women. The primary forms of economic activity in Banni include pastoralism, the collection of charcoal, leatherwork, and handicraft (Table 1).

Table 1: Women's occupational dependence in the Banni region

Primary occupation	%	Secondary occupation	%
Pastoralism	67	Pastoralism	33
Charcoal Gathering	28	Charcoal Gathering	62
Leather and handicraft	5	Leather and handicraft	5

It was found that 67% of the women respondents engage in pastoral activities as their primary occupation. This includes dairying and raising livestock. Women who work in livestock care are highly skilled in the management of vast herds of livestock, as well as in the grazing, milking, and other traditional aspects of livestock care. Notably, the participation of women in pastoralism is frequently undervalued and time-consuming, depriving women, especially young girls, of educational opportunities. During the summer, women are more vulnerable due to water scarcity, fodder limitation, and their migration to neighbouring regions in search of water and fodder.

Charcoal-gathering in which 28% of women are engaged (as their primary occupation) is a labour-intensive occupation because it requires cutting down trees and turning them into charcoal. This activity is largely undertaken by the women in the Banni grasslands. Women participate in the charcoal collection because they have few other economic options. This takes up most women's time and is harmful to their health, significantly when the temperature rises to between 40 and 45 degrees Celsius during

the summer. The charcoal collection is considered a low-status job, reinforcing gender norms and limiting women's agency.

The region's distinctiveness as a tourist destination and its potential for handicrafts make it an ideal location for expanding these industries. Particularly, Aari work has become more prominent in Hollywood films (Times of India, 2017). Nonetheless, fewer than 5% of women engage in this as their primary occupation.

Women and their awareness and participation in managing the Banni grassland

The results are discouraging when it comes to the perception of respondents on women's participation in the management of grassland (Table 2).

Table 2: Can Women's participation enhance Banni grassland restoration?

Responses	Male (%)	Female (%)
Strongly Agree	1.63	19.72
Agree	4.07	63.38
Neutral	10.57	8.45
Disagree	57.72	7.04
Strongly Disagree	26.01	1.41

The results are discouraging when it comes to women's participation in the management of grassland and their awareness of the issue. Only 1.63 per cent of the men respondents strongly agreed that women should be allowed to participate in conservation and decision-making processes on grassland management. Even if the majority of women agreed with the cause, only 19.72% of the women respondents took a firm stance to advocate for conservation and management efforts. This indicates that even women themselves are too timid to publicly acknowledge their role as stewards of the environment. Evidently, almost 83% of the male respondents had an unfavourable opinion towards the role of women in the management of Banni grassland. It was discovered through the thematic analysis that women's engagement was considered to be "non-traditional" and that there was a "lack of women's understanding of the issue."

When asked about community involvement in grassland conservation activities in general, male respondents demonstrated heightened involvement and responsiveness (Table 3).

Table 3: Are you involved in grassland conservation activities in any role?

Gender	Yes	No	NA
Male	68.29	16.26	15.45
Female	9.26	37.04	53.70

The majority of male respondents (68%) were very vocal about their right to manage and protect grasslands and are involved in conservation activities. On the other hand, just 9 % of female respondents acknowledged that they have some level of participation in managing the grasslands.

Discussions and Implications

In a thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with women and men supported by reports, RTIs, and experts' opinions, the following themes were explored for the lack of women's participation and awareness in protecting their environment-

1. Strong patriarchal outlook: Ethnic communities in Banni has a strong patriarchal outlook. Women's knowledge of their environment is undervalued and often goes unrecognised. Women are supposed to devote their time within their private space to domestic labour, children, and livestock care.
2. Intersectionality of marginalisation: women of the lower strata and those involved in pastoralism and charcoal have the least exposure to decision-making processes and roles to consider themselves in a position to discuss these issues publicly. A woman engaged in the collection of charcoal opines "We spend the majority of our time in the forest, and when we return home, we engage in domestic activities. We are inexperienced with this environmental jargon. Let the men deal with it."
3. Lack of capacity Building and Education among women: Over ninety-five per cent of the women respondents have, at maximum a primary school education. In addition, the non-governmental organisations that are active in the region are predominately led by men. It was discovered through a number of RTIs that inadequate measures had been taken up for the purpose of women's capacity building and their leadership in the management of grassland.

Recommendations

To promote sustainability, equity, and inclusive development in the Banni grasslands, women must be regarded as active agents armed with knowledge, training, and sustainable income sources. The key is to educate and empower women in environmental conservation (Maharjan et al., 2023; Bayeh, 2016). Diversifying women's incomes can lessen their dependence on charcoal collection and pastoral activity. Skill training, microfinance, and women-led entrepreneurship especially in handicrafts can expand economic opportunities (Singh, 2020; OECD, 2021). Viewing it from an ecofeminist lens, it is imperative to integrate gender perspectives into environmental policy. Gender-sensitive policies must consider the needs and challenges faced by women who work primarily in pastoral and charcoal collection activities. These measures should challenge discriminatory cultural norms, provide access to resources, and strengthen social protections (Rathgeber, 1995; Wu et al., 2022). The promotion of sustainable grassland management practices will help mitigate the adverse health effects associated with charcoal manufacturing and use. Land degradation and its adverse effects on women and their communities can be avoided by reforestation and cleaner charcoal manufacturing (Gibson & Newman, 2019, p. 3–18). The sustainability of

pastoral livelihoods in the Banni grasslands can be improved in the face of grassland degradation by implementing climate-resilient techniques such as rotational grazing and water management strategies (López-Carr et al., 2023; Bremner et al., 2010). In conclusion, women's participation in local conservation initiatives can support the preservation of traditional knowledge about the management of Banni grasslands and the advancement of sustainable land use techniques.

Conclusions and Future Research

In many societies, women have historically been the custodians of traditional ecological knowledge passed down through generations. Their knowledge of medicinal plants, biodiversity, and sustainable land use practices is vital in preserving local ecosystems and combating land degradation (Shiva & Mies, 2014).

By critically investigating the intersection of gender and ecological issues, this research paper contributes to the broader discourse on environmental sustainability and gender equality. Understanding and addressing the alienation of nature through a gender lens can foster more holistic approaches to environmental conservation, benefiting not only women but also the natural world at large. In Banni, ethnic groups have a strong patriarchal outlook. Women's environmental expertise is frequently ignored and devalued. Interventions at the policy level are necessary due to the inadequacy of environmental programs involving women in conservation measures. This involvement will increase their agency, boost their confidence, and challenge established gender norms, all while contributing to greater gender equality and environmental conservation. In summary, from an ecofeminist perspective, women's participation in Banni grasslands protection and addressing land degradation will bring a transformative and nurturing approach to conservation.

This research offers a new dimension to the study of ecofeminist ideas on women's roles in Banni grassland management and desertification in the context of SDGs 13 and 15. Empowerment and sustainable land use methods must consider their traditional roles, expertise, and traditions. Future studies should identify grassland management decision-making constraints for women by analysing societal norms, cultural attitudes, and institutional prejudices that may limit their involvement and access to resources. Future studies should also look at how women are adapting to climate change and land degradation. This can detect vulnerabilities and strengthen grassland-dependent communities.

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