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National Seminar on Effect of Ecopreneurship on Environment Protection & Sustainable Development

From Soil to Sustainability: A Study on the Contributions of Rural Women Ecopreneurs in Transforming Agricultural Practices in India

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Abstract

Introduction: In the face of climate change and ecological degradation, sustainable agriculture has emerged as a critical path toward environmental restoration. Rural women, long considered as passive contributors in agriculture, are now emerging as powerful ecopreneurs, innovating in organic farming, vermicomposting, water conservation, and the use of indigenous knowledge to transform the way agriculture is practiced. This study explores the pivotal role of rural women ecopreneurs in advancing sustainable agricultural practices in India and the ripple effects they create in environmental, social and economic spheres.

Methodology: This is a qualitative conceptual paper based on review and synthesis of secondary sources such as academic journals, NGO reports, government publications, and case studies; no primary data collection is involved. The study is framed by a conceptual account of ecopreneurship as entrepreneurship rooted in ecological principles, in which ecopreneurs seek to generate profit while promoting sustainable development, reducing ecological footprints and improving community well-being, and of rural women ecopreneurs as those who take entrepreneurial initiatives incorporating sustainable and environmentally

friendly practices in agriculture using local knowledge and resources. It is organised around four objectives: to explore the nature and scope of rural women's ecopreneurial activities in agriculture; to examine their impact on sustainable farming and environmental protection; to highlight the challenges they face; and to suggest policy-level recommendations.

Results & Discussion: Six areas of contribution are identified. Women ecopreneurs have embraced organic farming by avoiding chemical fertilizers and pesticides, with groups like the Deccan Development Society in Telangana promoting millet-based organic farming led by women. Many rural women preserve indigenous seed varieties that are climate-resilient and nutritionally superior, reducing dependency on GMOs and external inputs. By producing vermicompost they reduce farm waste and enrich the soil, promoting circular economy practices. Women lead local water conservation initiatives such as rooftop harvesting, bund construction and drip irrigation, and their traditional knowledge allows them to adapt through diversified cropping, shade crops and agroforestry, while creating employment and strengthening local food systems. Four challenges are documented: limited access to credit, inadequate training and technical knowledge, societal constraints, and market access and branding. Case highlights include the Deccan Development Society, where over 5,000 women farmers use traditional ecological knowledge to revive dryland farming, SEWA in Gujarat, and Navdanya in Uttarakhand.

Conclusion: Rural women ecopreneurs are unsung heroes of sustainable development. Their eco-agriculture practices represent a blend of innovation, resilience, and tradition. Recognizing their contributions not only strengthens environmental protection efforts but also empowers communities and enhances rural economies. Institutional and policy support — through eco-agriculture training programmes tailored for rural women, easy access to green credit, subsidies and micro-loans, facilitation of branding, certification and urban retail tie-ups, and national awards and policy representation highlighting women's eco-contributions — can further scale their impact toward a greener, more inclusive India.

Keywords: Rural Women Ecopreneurs; Sustainable Agriculture; Organic Farming; Indigenous Seeds; Vermicomposting; Water Conservation; Climate Resilience; Women Empowerment; Deccan Development Society; India.

1. Introduction

In the face of climate change and ecological degradation, sustainable agriculture has emerged as a critical path toward environmental restoration. Rural women, long considered as passive contributors in agriculture, are now emerging as powerful ecopreneurs. They are innovating in organic farming, vermicomposting, water conservation, and the use of indigenous knowledge to transform the way agriculture is practiced. This paper examines the contributions of these rural women ecopreneurs and the ripple effects they create in environmental, social, and economic spheres.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Ecopreneurship

Ecopreneurship refers to entrepreneurship rooted in ecological principles. Ecopreneurs seek to generate profit while promoting sustainable development, reducing ecological footprints, and improving community well-being.

2.2 Women Ecopreneurs

Rural women ecopreneurs are those who take entrepreneurial initiatives that incorporate sustainable and environmentally friendly practices, particularly in agriculture. They use local knowledge and resources innovatively to solve environmental challenges while improving livelihoods.

3. Objectives of the Study

- To explore the nature and scope of rural women's ecopreneurial activities in agriculture.
- To examine the impact of women ecopreneurs on sustainable farming and environmental protection.
- To highlight the challenges faced by rural women in sustaining eco-enterprises.
- To suggest policy-level recommendations to support women ecopreneurs.

4. Methodology

This is a qualitative conceptual paper based on review and synthesis of secondary sources such as academic journals, NGO reports, government publications, and case studies. No primary data collection is involved.

5. Contributions of Rural Women Ecopreneurs

5.1 Promotion of Organic Farming

Women ecopreneurs have embraced organic farming by avoiding chemical fertilizers and pesticides, thereby maintaining soil fertility and reducing pollution. Groups like the Deccan Development Society in Telangana promote millet-based organic farming led by women.

5.2 Conservation of Indigenous Seeds

Many rural women actively preserve indigenous seed varieties that are climate-resilient and nutritionally superior, reducing dependency on GMOs and external inputs.

5.3 Vermicomposting and Natural Fertilizers

By producing vermicompost, women not only reduce farm waste but also enrich the soil, promoting circular economy practices in agriculture.

5.4 Rainwater Harvesting and Water Management

Women ecopreneurs often take the lead in local water conservation initiatives like rooftop harvesting, bund construction, and drip irrigation to deal with erratic rainfall.

5.5 Climate Resilience and Eco-Awareness

Women's traditional knowledge allows them to identify climate-related risks and adapt through diversified cropping, use of shade crops, and agroforestry.

5.6 Employment Generation and Community Impact

These initiatives often create employment opportunities, especially for other women, and strengthen local food systems while reducing migration.

6. Challenges Faced by Rural Women Ecopreneurs

6.1 Limited Access to Credit

Women face gendered barriers in accessing formal finance for launching or expanding their eco-enterprises.

6.2 Inadequate Training and Technical Knowledge

Lack of institutional support and access to updated knowledge about sustainable practices limits their growth.

6.3 Societal Constraints

Patriarchal norms often restrict women's mobility, decision-making power, and participation in farmer organizations or markets.

6.4 Market Access and Branding

Women struggle with branding, packaging, and accessing urban markets where demand for organic and eco-products is high.

7. Case Highlights

- **Deccan Development Society (Telangana):** Over 5,000 women farmers use traditional ecological knowledge to revive dryland farming.
- **Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA, Gujarat):** Women are trained in water harvesting and solar-powered irrigation.
- **Navdanya (Uttarakhand):** Women-led seed banks promote biodiversity and food sovereignty.

8. Recommendations

- **Training and Skill Development:** Promote eco-agriculture training programs tailored for rural women.
- **Financial Inclusion:** Easy access to green credit, subsidies, and micro-loans.

- **Market Linkages:** Government and NGOs should facilitate branding, certification, and urban retail tie-ups.
- **Recognition and Representation:** National awards and policy representation should highlight women's eco-contributions.

9. Conclusion

Rural women ecopreneurs are unsung heroes of sustainable development. Their eco-agriculture practices represent a blend of innovation, resilience, and tradition. Recognizing their contributions not only strengthens environmental protection efforts but also empowers communities and enhances rural economies. Institutional and policy support can further scale their impact toward a greener, more inclusive India.

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