



Women At The Forefront: Exploring Grassroots Leadership In Environmental Conservation In Uttarakhand

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Abstract

Uttarakhand is home to many remarkable women who have made significant contributions across various fields, particularly in environmental leadership. These women actively engage in initiatives focused on environmental protection, sustainable practices, and climate change mitigation. Their efforts exemplify effective grassroots activism that addresses pressing ecological challenges such as water scarcity and soil erosion. By participating in conservation programs and collaborating with NGOs, women in Uttarakhand are making significant strides toward sustainable development, emphasising the importance of integrating their perspectives into environmental discussions. These women organise movements, protect natural resources, and educate communities about environmental issues, demonstrating their crucial role in shaping sustainable practices. This research study emphasises the significant yet often overlooked contributions of women in Uttarakhand to ecological sustainability, based on secondary literature. In grassroots activism, women have played a pivotal role in significant environmental movements, such as the Chipko Movement. This movement effectively championed ecofeminism and ultimately led to the implementation of a logging ban in the region. They are vital guardians of the forest, harnessing the wisdom of their ancestors and grassroots efforts to protect the breathtaking Himalayan ecosystem. As vital protectors of water resources, they play a crucial role in addressing water scarcity and pollution through traditional harvesting techniques and grassroots conservation efforts. Their expertise in water collection boosts community resilience and promotes sustainable practices for environmental protection. Through grassroots organisations, they lead campaigns aimed at conserving biodiversity, combating deforestation, and promoting renewable energy in rural areas. Their leadership not only fosters community empowerment and social equity but also advocates for a greener future.

Keywords: Grassroots Leadership, Environmental Initiatives, Sustainable Practices

Introduction

In recent decades, women have become increasingly important in environmental management. They are now key leaders and active participants in sustainable development and environmental protection. This change is crucial as the world faces challenges like climate change, resource depletion, and ecological damage. Uttarakhand has a rich history of remarkable women whose contributions in various fields have significantly enhanced the state's reputation both in India and around the world. Their leadership in communities and active involvement in social change, education, and health initiatives have been pivotal.

Notably, women in Uttarakhand play a crucial role in environmental leadership. They actively engage in initiatives that focus on environmental protection, advocating for sustainable practices, and implementing strategies to mitigate climate change. For instance, several grassroots organisations led by women have spearheaded campaigns to conserve local biodiversity, combat deforestation, and promote the use of renewable energy sources in rural areas. Their efforts are not just noteworthy; they serve as an inspiring example of grassroots activism, showcasing how local communities can come together to promote sustainability and address the pressing ecological challenges facing the region, such as water scarcity and soil erosion. By leading workshops, participating in reforestation drives, and influencing policy discussions, these women are shaping a more sustainable future for Uttarakhand, embodying resilience and commitment to both their communities and the environment.

Women have been instrumental in Uttarakhand's environmental movements, beginning with the Chipko movement and continuing with current initiatives in water conservation and waste management. They actively protect forests, revive water sources, combat pollution, and promote sustainability, leveraging their knowledge of local ecosystems and their direct connection to environmental issues impacting their lives. Many women in Uttarakhand participate in community-driven projects that aim to conserve local forests, manage water resources, and promote biodiversity. Their leadership often stems from a deep-rooted connection to their land and a profound cultural understanding of the environment's importance. They organise grassroots movements, advocate for policies safeguarding natural resources, and play crucial roles in educating their communities about environmental issues. These women, characterised by their unwavering passion and dedication, strive to create positive change in their communities and beyond.

This research study is based on secondary literature. It aims to celebrate the contributions of these remarkable women, underscoring the critical and often underappreciated role that women in Uttarakhand play in enhancing environmental sustainability.

Women in Uttarakhand have demonstrated pivotal grassroots leadership in environmental initiatives through historical movements and contemporary projects. Here are some of the awe-inspiring stories of the brave women of Uttarakhand that are mentioned below:

The Chipko movement, a non-violent social and ecological movement, is the primary testament to women's environmental leadership in the region. Prominent social and ecological activism figures, such as Gaura Devi, symbolise resilience and determination. **Gaura Devi**, a notable leader of the Chipko movement, played an instrumental role in this grassroots initiative that began in the 1970s. The Chipko movement emerged as a response to the rampant commercial logging threatening the rich forests of Uttarakhand. It was characterised by a novel approach where villagers, particularly women, literally embraced the trees to protect them from being cut down. Gaura Devi's unwavering bravery and commitment inspired countless residents, marking a pivotal moment in India's history of environmental activism. Her legacy continues to influence environmentalists and activists today.

Another powerful example of women's activism can be seen in the efforts of **a group of women from Khirakot** near Almora, who emerged to combat illegal mining in the area. Forming a self-help group, these women took a stand against the overpowering influence of industrialists who were depleting their forests and fields through unlawful mining. Their collective action drew the local community's attention and compelled the government to take notice. In a landmark victory in 1982, the government was forced to withdraw mining licenses and permanently close the mines, a profound outcome resulting from their courageous stand. This victory revitalised the local populace and inspired similar movements in neighbouring regions, such as Pithoragarh and Sirol.

Women like **Prabha Devi**, beyond collective movements, also make significant impacts through sheer dedication and are working to save the environment in their own ways. She has devoted herself to planting over 500 trees in the village of Palasat. Understanding the importance of trees for future generations, she has taken significant action. At 76 years old, Prabha has cultivated an entire forest in her village in Uttarakhand. This green cover features diverse species, including oak, rhododendron, cinnamon, and soap nut (reetha). Standing tall and proud, these trees serve as guardians of the community, providing shade, beauty, and a habitat for local wildlife. Her commitment to this cause reflects her unwavering spirit.

and determination as she nurtures these young saplings with an indomitable zeal. Each tree represents her effort to combat deforestation and her passion for preserving the environment and enhancing the quality of life for her fellow villagers. Through her ongoing efforts, she inspires others to appreciate and protect the natural world around them.

Furthermore, **Basanti Bisht** has emerged as a distinguished leader in Uttarakhand's environmental conservation and social empowerment. Renowned for her remarkable contributions, she spearheaded various initiatives to replenish the Kosi River, which had suffered from severe degradation. Through her dedicated efforts, she formed numerous women's self-help groups that focused on revitalising local ecosystems and addressing women's issues. Her work earned the prestigious 'Nari Shakti Samman Award' from former President Pranab Mukherjee, underscoring her impact in fostering women's empowerment. Through her campaigns, she has supported female candidates in local Panchayat elections and raised awareness about critical issues affecting women in the region. Basanti Bisht's initiatives have significantly restored the once-dry Kosi River, enhancing its flow across all 13 districts in Uttarakhand, including areas previously afflicted by drought.

Moreover, Gandhian and environmental activist **Radha Bhatt**, known as the "Gandhi of the Hills," is a prominent leader in environmental protection and women's empowerment in Bageshwar, Uttarakhand, and across India. In 2025, she received the Padma Shri, India's fourth-highest civilian honour, for her social work. Radha Bhatt played a vital role in the Uttarakhand River Bachao Abhiyan, a campaign aimed at protecting rivers in Uttarakhand and opposing hydroelectric projects. She joined this campaign in 2008 and led a 2,000-kilometre padayatra to advocate for river rights. The campaign focuses on safeguarding the rivers of Uttarakhand and the Himalayan ecosystem from the damage caused by hydroelectric projects. Radha Bhatt actively opposed the construction of projects that endanger the flow of the Ganga and its tributaries. She is the President of Lakshmi Ashram Kausani in Bageshwar and continues to lead efforts to conserve and protect rivers in the mountains of Uttarakhand.

In the heart of the mid-Himalayan region, women farmers play a pivotal role as the guardians of rich agricultural traditions. Their commitment not only nurtures the soil but also preserves the incredible diversity of plant and crop species, ensuring that these precious practices continue to thrive for generations to come.

Khasti Devi Koranga, a committed farmer from the remote village of Kharku in Bageshwar district, has made significant strides in empowering women farmers in the Kapkot block. Through her efforts, she successfully mobilised thousands of women to adopt the System of Crop Intensification (SCI). Her impactful work promoting self-reliance among women farmers earned her the prestigious Best Farmer Award at the International Conference on the System of Crop Intensification for Climate-Smart Livelihood and Nutritional Security (ICSCI 2022), held from 12 Dec to 14 Dec. At just 35 years old, Khasti demonstrated the SCI techniques on her farm and subsequently shared this valuable knowledge with fellow farmers. Her initiatives have not only enhanced agricultural practices but have also benefited many women in the Kapkot block of Uttarakhand, contributing to their overall livelihood and nutritional security.

In a compelling display of leadership, **Bhagoti Devi**, the esteemed sarpanch of Parwada Village in Nainital District, Uttarakhand, spearheaded a remarkable initiative to restore a previously barren 280-hectare area of forest as the Van Panchayat for her village over the course of seven transformative years. Under her strong leadership, the women came together to establish strict rules for the use of natural resources. They developed a clear quota system and a new rotation plan for harvesting fodder and timber in a sustainable manner. Her hard work rejuvenated the forest, creating a rich and thriving ecosystem. It also made sure that the forest's resources were used wisely for the benefit of nearby villages. This achievement highlights the significance of women's involvement in managing and making decisions about natural resources. It serves as a powerful example of environmental sustainability and community empowerment.

In modern-day Uttarakhand, a remarkable wave of change is sweeping through water management and sanitation, led by the inspiring efforts of elected women representatives. These influential leaders are not just making decisions; they're transforming their communities and ensuring that everyone has access to clean water and proper sanitation. Their dedication is paving the way for healthier, more sustainable futures.

Sarpanch Kavita Devi from Bageshwar district and Sarpanch Nikita Chauhan from Dehradun are exemplary figures of positive change in 2023. They were honoured by the President of India on International Women's Day for their contributions to making their villages Open Defecation Free (ODF) Plus and for their leadership in water conservation efforts. Each received the Swachh Sujal Shakti Samman in recognition of their outstanding work. As sarpanches, they were acknowledged for their strong leadership and commitment to the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM-G) and the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM). Their impact extends beyond simply building facilities; they have transformed the way their communities think and act. Their dedication has helped their villages achieve "Open Defecation Free (ODF) Plus" status. This highlights the crucial role of women in enhancing public health and preserving the environment at the local level. This work ultimately leads to healthier and cleaner communities. Their awards not only recognised grassroots women's leadership in Uttarakhand but also aimed to inspire further efforts in village cleanliness and water conservation.

The Women Waste Warrior leader, The Paryavaran Sakhi model, initiated in 2013 at Uttarakhand's Corbett Tiger Reserve, has trained 23 women, known as Waste Warriors, from diverse backgrounds to create a sustainable waste management system. These women carry out door-to-door dry waste collection, segregate waste into 22 categories, and promote awareness about waste management and plastic pollution across eight panchayats. The model has since expanded to Sahastradhara, where five women, referred to as Sakhis, work to combat plastic pollution and waste mismanagement. The Sakhis are driven by a sense of responsibility to preserve resources for future generations. Notable stories include Reema, a dedicated Paryavaran Sakhi who balances family duties with her role, and sisters-in-law Sudha and Mukta, who faced societal pressures yet remained committed to their mission. Through their relentless efforts, these Women Waste Warrior leaders are addressing the immediate challenges of plastic pollution while contributing to long-term solutions for a healthier planet. Their work highlights the importance of gender equity in environmental leadership, demonstrating that women play a crucial role in shaping the discourse on sustainability and climate action.

Modern advocates, such as **Priyanka Digari**, draw inspiration from the historic Chipko movement, which emphasised the importance of environmental conservation and community empowerment. Digari and her fellow activists in Pithoragarh are actively championing initiatives within their local communities to plant native tree species, which not only contribute to biodiversity but also help restore ecosystems. They are committed to reviving traditional millet farming practices, promoting sustainable and resilient agricultural techniques that are resilient to climate change. Additionally, their efforts include implementing comprehensive waste segregation programs to promote effective waste management and reduce pollution, as well as encouraging community participation in creating a cleaner, greener environment. Through these multifaceted initiatives, they aim to empower local populations while nurturing their connection to the land.

Discussion

Women in Uttarakhand are making significant progress toward sustainable development. These inspiring women, along with many others, have courageously faced challenges related to environmental degradation and social inequities. They embody the enduring spirit and tenacity that characterise Uttarakhand's heritage. They mobilise communities around shared values of conservation, often through formal and informal networks such as Mahila Mangal Dals (women's welfare associations) and Self-Help Groups (SHGs). These organisations empower women while promoting sustainable practices, such as organic farming, seed saving, and water conservation, all of which are crucial for the ecological health of the region. They actively participate in reforestation projects and run awareness campaigns focused on waste management, as well as promote eco-friendly agricultural techniques. Their efforts ensure that women's perspectives and needs are included in ongoing discussions about environmental protection. This engagement not only enhances ecological sustainability but also fosters social equity, thereby empowering local communities.

This involvement highlights the essential role women play in advocating for and shaping a greener, more sustainable future for the next generations. It demonstrates how their leadership can drive meaningful change in both environmental and social contexts. Women's traditional knowledge, experiences, and perspectives are crucial for sustainable development policy decisions, particularly in the management of

natural resources, biodiversity, and ecosystems. Encouraging greater participation by women is essential to achieving sustainable development.

Conclusion

Women in Uttarakhand play a critical and leading role in sustainable environmental practices, rooted in their close, historical relationship with nature and vital contributions to local livelihoods. The leadership of these women is evident in grassroots activism, traditional resource management, and modern initiatives. To promote the sustainable development of Uttarakhand, it is essential to empower its women by acknowledging their critical roles in environmental stewardship, addressing systemic barriers they encounter, and channelling investments into their capabilities. By strengthening their knowledge, resilience, and leadership skills, we can cultivate an ecosystem where forest conservation strategies are effectively implemented, leading to enhanced community well-being and economic sustainability.

Author's Contribution

The author edited the manuscript to its final form.

Acknowledgement

There is no Acknowledgement

Funding

This research did not receive any funding from public, commercial, or non-profit organisations.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that they have no financial interests or personal relationships that could compromise the integrity of this article.

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