

EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

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ABSTRACT

Education in life skills is crucial for equipping people to handle problems in the real world, especially when it comes to environmental sustainability. Prior to the 18th and 19th centuries, women were excluded from all important spheres of society and were seen to have no role in promoting and preserving the environment. However, after becoming more aware of their rights and obligations and assessing their surroundings, people made a concerted effort to speak out against environmental degradation. Women started a number of campaigns advocating for better environmental preservation and the protection of natural resources. Since women are frequently in charge of household resources, agriculture, water conservation, and energy consumption, they have a significant role in promoting sustainable behaviour, particularly in rural and developing countries. The relationship between life skills education and women's roles in environmental sustainability is examined in this study, with a focus on how life skills empower women to lead community projects, represent sustainable legislation, and make informed decisions. In order to optimize women's contribution to environmental sustainability, the study also highlights the need to facilitate female access to economic opportunities, education, and decision-making processes. Secondary data was used in the study. Women combine critical thinking, resource management, leadership, and communication skills to make significant contributions to sustainable development at the household and community levels. A combination of life skills education and women's active participation is critical for creating a more sustainable and fair future.

Keywords: Life Skill, Life Skill Education, Environment, Environmental Sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

Environmental sustainability remains one of our time's most pressing challenges, fuelled by human activities such as deforestation, pollution, and resource overexploitation. These actions have resulted in environmental degradation, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and water scarcity, which endanger ecosystems and future generations (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2021). Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes technological advancements, policy reforms, and behavioural changes. Life skills education is emerging as an important strategy for encouraging sustainable practices. It

encourages individuals and communities to adopt environmentally friendly behaviours by developing critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills (UNESCO, 2017). It provides people with the knowledge and competencies needed to address complex environmental issues and embrace sustainable living (Tilbury, 2011). Women play an important role in sustainability, especially in rural and indigenous communities, where they function as main carers, resource managers, and community leaders (Agarwal, 2010). Their strong interaction with natural resources—developed via work in agriculture, water management, and domestic energy usage—gives them unique insights on ecosystems and sustainable practices (UN Women, 2020). However, institutional impediments, such as restricted access to educational and decision-making platforms, often impede their ability to contribute effectively (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2016). Integrating life skills education with gender empowerment initiatives can help close these gaps and empower women to drive environmental sustainability (UNESCO & UN Women, 2021). Women who are educated and empowered have the potential to lead grassroots movements, influence policy, and implement innovative resource management strategies (Leach et al., 2018). Several global initiatives have demonstrated the efficacy of combining life skills training with gender-specific strategies to increase women's contributions to sustainability (OECD, 2022). Creating a sustainable future requires addressing the intersectionality of education, gender equality, and environmental stewardship. This comprehensive approach promotes equity and resilience, empowering communities to effectively address pressing environmental challenges. Educating and empowering women not only improves their individual capacities but also strengthens larger efforts to protect and preserve the environment (World Bank, 2020).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Mofrad et al. (2013) examined life skills among 500 Malaysian youth aged 18 to 25, focusing on identity development, decision-making, interpersonal communication, and health maintenance, and found significant gender disparities in health-related skills. Pujar and Patil (2016) studied 120 rural adolescent girls in Karnataka, India, revealing that life skills interventions significantly improved critical thinking (94.16%), problem-solving (70%), creative thinking (50%), empathy (57.5%), and stress-reduction (79.12%). Monfared and Nejad (2016) conducted a quasi-experimental study in Shiraz, Iran, with 100 Class IX students, showing that life skills training enhanced achievement motivation, problem-solving abilities, and reduced anxiety. Salonen et al. (2017) analysed seventh-grade students' perceptions of science-related careers and found a disconnect between science education and 21st-century work skills like creativity, ICT, and innovation. Rani et al. (2018) assessed life skills of undergraduate students across gender, institution type, and academic stream, concluding that private school students and males had significantly higher life skills, with no major differences among streams. Istiyono et al. (2019) evaluated physics problem-solving skills among 466 students and found female students outperforming males, with most students showing moderate (48.28%) or high problem-solving proficiency. Banajawad and Adi (2020) emphasized the importance of rural youth skill development in India for employment, productivity, poverty alleviation, and sustainable rural growth, urging integration of industry-linked education and policy reforms. Swain and Swain (2020) analyzed National Skill Development Corporation data and highlighted India's demographic dividend,

underscoring the need for entrepreneurial training through programs like PMKVY and DDU-GKY under the “Skill India” initiative. Salah et al. (2021) investigated kindergarten students’ life skills from the perspective of 200 teachers, revealing that while learning skills ranked highest overall, only learning skills showed a gender difference, favouring boys. Patil and Charantimath (2021) examined employability through skill development programs, identifying significant gaps between employer expectations and job seeker capabilities, and called for targeted education, training, and short-term courses to align skills with national initiatives like Make in India, Atmanirbhar Bharat, and the Rs 5 lakh crore economy goal.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of this study were to find out the importance of Life Skills Education and analyse the role of women in environmental sustainability. By synthesising existing research, this study explores how to link Life Skills Education to Women’s Empowerment in Sustainability.

RESEARCH QUESTION

1. What is the concept of Life skills Education?
2. What is the Role of Women in Environmental Sustainability?
3. How Life skills Education Integrates Environmental Sustainability?
4. What are the challenges and barriers in life skills education and the role of women in environmental sustainability?

METHODOLOGY

In the present study I used text and document analysis. The study is on the basis of secondary sources of data like research articles, journals, websites, theses, expert opinions, books, university news, Newspaper etc.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

1. Life Skills Education and Environmental Sustainability:

In the words of M. J. Herkovits, “The environment is the sum total of external conditions that surround a person, along with the inter-relationship between these conditions and human beings, other living creatures, plants, micro-organisms, and property” (Herkovits, as cited in Singh, 2006). Sustainability is conceptualized as a vision for a world where both present and future generations enjoy good health; communities and nations experience security, peace, and prosperity; economic opportunities are accessible to everyone; and the integrity of the biosphere, which supports life, is both restored and maintained at a level essential for realizing these objectives. To fulfil this vision, it is imperative to address all four dimensions of sustainability (Cortese & Rowe, 2012).

Environmental sustainability refers to the capacity to preserve ecological equilibrium within the Earth’s natural systems while ensuring the conservation of natural resources. This approach aims to support the health and prosperity of both present and future generations (UNESCO, 2017).

The term “life skill” has been defined in different ways and one of the most acceptable definitions is the one given by the World Health Organisation – “Life skills are a group of psycho social competencies and interpersonal skills that help people make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, emphasise with others and cope with and manage their lives in a healthy and productive manner” (World Health Organization, 1999). Some of the characteristics of life skills are –

- Life skills are cross-cutting application of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes, important for individual development and lifelong learning.
- Life skills are part of a right-based approach to learning.
- The concept of life skill includes – critical thinking, creative thinking, decision making, problem solving and interpersonal relationships.

The ancient Indian system of education was both knowledge and skill based but somewhere in the course of the development of the nation, our education system mainly focussed on imparting knowledge and the practical application of knowledge or skill based learning lost importance; although the different commissions, committees and National Educational Policies mentioned the need for imparting vocational and skill based education but they were could not be The World Health Organization (1999) has spoken about ten (10) core life skills and the UNICEF (2012) has also spoken about some skills in its report. The ten core life skills are –

- Self awareness
- Empathy
- Creative thinking
- Critical thinking
- Decision making
- Problem solving
- Effective communication
- Interpersonal relationships
- Coping with stress
- Coping with emotion

Core Life Skills for Environmental Sustainability

- I. Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving:** Helps individuals assess environmental challenges and devise innovative solutions.
- II. Decision-Making:** Enables informed choices about resource use and waste management.
- III. Interpersonal Communication:** Facilitates advocacy for sustainability within communities.
- IV. Empathy and Self-Awareness:** Cultivates respect for nature and an appreciation of biodiversity.

Need for life skills in environmental sustainability

Core life skills are crucial for promoting environmental sustainability by empowering individuals to make informed decisions, collaborate, and adapt to ecological challenges. Critical thinking and problem-solving enable people to analyze issues like climate change and innovate sustainable solutions. Empathy and interpersonal skills foster support for marginalized communities and community-driven projects. Decision-making and adaptability encourage conscious choices, such as reducing waste or transitioning to renewable energy. Effective communication and advocacy drive collective action for sustainability goals. Systems thinking and creativity help design holistic solutions to environmental problems. Collectively, these skills cultivate a mindset of collaboration, ethical responsibility, and resilience, essential for addressing climate challenges. By incorporating these skills into education and development, societies can better create a sustainable and regenerative future.

2. LIFE SKILLS AND WOMEN'S ROLE IN ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY WITH REFERENCE TO NEP 2020

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 places significant emphasis on fostering life skills education and environmental sustainability while advocating for gender equity and women's empowerment. The policy's holistic approach aligns with the principles of equipping individuals—especially women—with the knowledge and skills to contribute to sustainable development.

A. Life Skills Education in NEP 2020

NEP 2020 recognizes the importance of developing critical life skills to prepare learners for real-world challenges.

- **Focus on Holistic Learning:** The policy emphasizes on the development of skills like critical thinking, problem-solving, decision-making, and creativity—skills essential for addressing environmental issues.
- **Integration of Sustainability:** NEP 2020 mandates the inclusion of environmental education, focusing on sustainability and ecological literacy to instil responsible behaviors from an early age of the child.
- **Vocational and Skill-Based Training:** Practical life skills, such as sustainable farming, water conservation, and renewable energy management, should be promoted to bridge the gap between education and action.

B. Women's Role in Environmental Sustainability under NEP 2020

Women have long played an integral role in environmental stewardship. In rural areas, they manage essential resources such as water, fuel, and food, making them uniquely positioned to implement sustainable practices. Examples such as the Chipko Movement in India, where women organized to protect forests, underscore their historical contributions to environmental conservation. Women continue to lead sustainability efforts across various domains:

National Development: National development encompasses the advancement of a nation's economic, social, and political conditions, aimed at enhancing the overall quality of life

for its citizens (Todaro & Smith, 2020). It involves enhancing the quality of life for citizens through improved infrastructure, healthcare, education, and employment opportunities. Economic development is central, focusing on increasing national income, reducing poverty, and achieving sustainable growth. Social development includes addressing issues like inequality, human rights, and access to basic services. Political development entails strengthening governance systems, promoting democracy, and ensuring rule of law. National development also emphasizes environmental sustainability, ensuring that growth does not compromise natural resources or the welfare of future generations. Overall, it requires coordinated efforts from the government, businesses, and civil society to build a stable, prosperous, and inclusive society. By fostering innovation, improving living standards, and ensuring social justice, national development seeks to create a balanced and equitable future for all citizens (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). NEP 2020 stresses gender inclusion and empowerment as key pillars for national development-

I. Gender Inclusion :

The policy prioritizes equitable access to education for girls and women, ensuring they have opportunities to acquire life skills and environmental knowledge.

II. Empowering Women through Vocational Training

NEP 2020 encourages skill-building in areas like agriculture, renewable energy, and resource management, enabling women to lead sustainability efforts in their communities.

III. Leadership and Advocacy

By fostering life skills, NEP 2020 prepares women to take on leadership roles in environmental conservation and policymaking.

Women's Leadership in Sustainable Development

Several Indian women leaders have made significant contributions:

- Dr. Vandana Shiva is an Indian scholar, Advocates for organic farming and biodiversity.
- Sunita Narain, Director of CSE, focuses on pollution and climate change.
- Ela Bhatt, Founder of SEWA, empowers women through sustainable livelihoods.
- Madhuri Dixit Nene, Indian actress, promotes waste management and water conservation.
- Rukmini Devi Arundale, Indian dancer, preserved traditional knowledge and promoted sustainable practices in the arts and education.
- Wangari Maathai (Kenya), showcased the global impact of female leadership through the Green Belt Movement.

Resource Management: Women in rural communities apply traditional knowledge to manage water resources, reduce waste, and promote energy efficiency.

Education and Environmental Advocacy: As educators within households and communities, women instill environmental values in future generations.

3. INTEGRATING LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

The integration of life skills education with environmental sustainability focuses on equipping individuals with the abilities to make informed, eco-conscious decisions while fostering behaviours that promote sustainable living (UNESCO, 2017). This methodology guarantees that students not only recognize environmental challenges but are also equipped to engage in significant initiatives.

KEY ASPECTS OF INTEGRATION

Some of the key aspects of integrating life skills education and environmental sustainability are –

Incorporating Environmental Themes into Life Skills Education

- Topics such as climate change, biodiversity, waste management, and renewable energy should be embedded into life skills lessons.
- Learners should be taught to analyse environmental challenges and develop sustainable solutions.

Practical Applications of Skills

- Activities like tree planting, water conservation projects, and recycling programs should be integrated into the curriculum.
- Inclusion of real-world problem-solving exercises would encourage learners to apply their knowledge in everyday situations.

Fostering Behavioural Change

- Life skills like critical thinking, decision-making, and empathy help individuals adopt sustainable practices.
- Education as an aim to develop may encourage a shift from harmful habits to eco-friendly behaviors.

Community and Collaboration Focus

- Collaborative projects, such as clean-up campaigns and community gardens, promote teamwork and collective responsibility for environmental health.

BENEFITS OF INTEGRATION

- **Environmental Awareness:** Environmental awareness refers to understanding and recognizing the impact of human activities on the environment. It involves knowledge about issues like pollution, climate change and resource depletion. Promoting environmental awareness encourages responsible behaviour, sustainable practices, and a collective effort to protect natural resources for future generations. Increases understanding of sustainability issues and solutions.

- **Empowerment:** Empowerment refers to the process through which individuals or groups are equipped with the necessary tools, resources, and self-assurance to assume control over their lives, make well-informed choices, and realize their objectives. It fosters self-reliance, promotes equality, and encourages participation in societal, political, and economic activities, leading to personal and collective growth. Provides individuals with the confidence and skills to lead eco-friendly initiatives.
- **Community Impact:** Community impact refers to the positive or negative effects that actions, initiatives, or policies have on a local community's well-being. It involves changes in areas like health, education, economy, and social cohesion. Positive community impact promotes growth, inclusivity, and sustainability, enhancing the quality of life for all members. Encourages collective action to address environmental challenges.

Long-Term Sustainability : Long-term sustainability encompasses strategies and regulations that address present requirements while ensuring that future generations can fulfil their own needs without hindrance. It involves balancing economic, environmental, and social factors, ensuring resource conservation, reducing waste, and fostering resilience, thereby maintaining a healthy and thriving planet for years to come. Install lifelong habits that support environmental conservation.

4. ADDRESSING CHALLENGES THROUGH NEP 2020

Despite the transformative potential of life skills education and the significant role women play in environmental sustainability, several challenges and barriers hinder their progress. These challenges are rooted in educational, socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional factors. Some of them are discussed below:

I. Educational Barriers

- **Limited Access to Education :** Many women, particularly in rural and underserved communities, lack access to quality education, including life skills training.
- **Inadequate Integration of Environmental Themes :** Life skills curricula often fail to include environmental topics, limiting the ability of individuals to connect daily decision-making with sustainability.
- **Gender Gaps in Education :** In many regions, societal norms prioritize education for boys over girls, restricting women's opportunities to acquire life skills and environmental knowledge.

II. Socioeconomic Challenges

- **Poverty and Resource Constraints :** Financial limitations prevent women from accessing education and technologies that support sustainable practices, such as clean energy solutions or sustainable agriculture tools.
- **Lack of Economic Opportunities :** Women often face restricted access to credit and markets, which limits their ability to engage in sustainable enterprises or lead conservation projects.

III. Cultural and Institutional Barriers

- **Gender Norms and Roles :** Societal expectations regarding appropriate behaviours for individuals are often dictated by their gender, commonly referred to as gender norms. These norms dictate roles, behaviours and appearance, often reinforcing stereotypes. They can limit personal freedom and contribute to inequality. Challenging these norms is crucial for promoting gender equality and creating a more inclusive society. Traditional gender roles often confine women to domestic responsibilities, reducing their participation in environmental decision-making.
- **Underrepresentation in Leadership:** Women are frequently excluded from leadership positions in policymaking and environmental governance, limiting their influence on sustainability initiatives.
- **Discrimination and Bias:** Systemic discrimination restricts women's access to resources, education, and opportunities to contribute to sustainability efforts.

IV. Technological and Awareness Gaps

- **Limited Access to Technology:** Women in remote areas may lack exposure to technologies essential for sustainable farming, renewable energy, or resource management.
- **Low Awareness Levels:** A lack of environmental awareness, due to inadequate education and outreach, limits women's ability to engage in sustainability practices effectively.
- **Bridging Educational Gaps:** NEP 2020 aims to eliminate gender disparities in education, particularly in rural and underserved regions, providing women with equal access to life skills education.
- **Community Engagement:** The policy promotes localized education initiatives where women can act as educators and sustainability advocates.
- **Promoting Environmental Responsibility:** By integrating sustainability into curricula, NEP 2020 encourages women to adopt eco-friendly practices and influence others in their communities.

CONCLUSION

The intersection of life skills education and women's roles in environmental sustainability presents a transformative pathway for addressing global challenges. By empowering women through education and skill-building, societies can unlock their potential to lead sustainable practices, promote equity, and ensure the well-being of future generations. Women's contributions to environmental stewardship—ranging from grassroots initiatives to global leadership—are pivotal in creating a resilient planet. To achieve this vision, there must be a systemic approach that integrates life skills education into all facets of society. Partnerships between governments, private organizations, and communities should focus on creating inclusive opportunities for women to contribute meaningfully to sustainability efforts. Fostering gender equity in decision-

making processes will also ensure a balanced and holistic approach to tackling environmental issues. Women's empowerment, fuelled by life skills education, has the power to transform societies and inspire a global movement toward environmental responsibility. By investing in this synergy, humanity can secure a healthier and more sustainable future for generations to come.

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