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Integrating Gender Perspectives into Environmental Sustainability: Ecological Security and Post-Conflict Impacts in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT
Understanding the pressing need to incorporate gender views into environmental sustainability initiatives in Middle Eastern conflict-affected areas with a special focus on Iraq, Syria, and Yemen is crucial. This paper argues that gender mainstreaming enhances ecological security by ensuring that environmental programs address not just the needs but also the vulnerabilities and the distinct roles of both women and men. The study also emphasizes how women are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation in post-conflict situations despite the fact that they are mainly the primary caretakers and resource managers. Additionally, it states that men encounter unique difficulties including losing their means of subsistence or being displaced. The paper shows how water scarcity, agricultural decline and disrupted services affect women's daily lives more severely by applying different case studies. The study calls for gender-responsive policy reforms, women's leadership in environmental governance, and stronger advocacy to link gender equality with climate resilience and peacebuilding.

Keywords: *Gender Mainstreaming, Ecological Security, Post-Conflict Situation, Middle East, Environmental Justice, Water Scarcity, Ecofeminism.*

Introduction

Human security and environmental sustainability are closely related since people's access to basic resources like food, clean water and safe housing is directly impacted by environmental health. Societies around the world are seriously threatened by the ecological and climatic issues of today which range from biodiversity loss to water scarcity (*Water Scarcity*, n.d.). If look closely, these impacts are not gender neutral. Men and women react to environmental change in different ways because of regional social roles and inequities (UN Women, 2025). A gender-specific approach to environmental concerns is crucial as evidenced by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) 's observation that "environmental change has specific differentiated impacts on women and girls or on men and boys (Gender and the Environment, n.d.)." This study contends that incorporating gender perspectives into sustainability programs is critical for ecological security or the maintenance of healthy ecosystems that support human well-being particularly in post-conflict Middle Eastern settings.

A typical definition of environmental sustainability is the ability to meet current requirements without sacrificing the ability of future generations to meet theirs (Gender and the Environment, n.d.). However, such initiatives frequently ignore social factors, so as a result gender mainstreaming provides a framework to overcome this gap. It evaluates how policies and programs affect men and women differently and makes sure they both gain equally (UN Women, 2022). Environmental efforts can become more egalitarian and effective by taking gender into explicit consideration. On the other hand, disregarding gender might worsen social justice and environmental results while also sustaining inequality (International Organization for Migration, Office of the Inspector General, 2006).

Empowering women is recognized as a 'crucial' climate strategy. It is important to educate and empower women as it can have a meaningful effect on reducing a country's emissions (UN Women, 2023). It can also assist to make more impactful environmental policies. Indeed, slogans like *"There is no Planet B"* highlight the urgency of environmental action (Janardhan, 1970). Climate experts frequently mention that women's full participation is among the most *"substantive measures"* to mitigate ecological threats (What Is Gender Mainstreaming? 2025). In a nutshell, environmental advocacy and research agree to a sustainable future requires listening to and lifting up women alongside men.

This paper first highlights the rationale, why gender must be integrated into environmental sustainability. After that it examines how gender mainstreaming contributes to ecological security. It then outlines relevant theoretical frameworks (such as ecofeminism) that illuminate the gender–environment nexus. The study in continuance analyzes how environmental degradation in post-conflict contexts affects women and men in a different way. This research uses Middle East case studies (Iraq, Syria, Yemen) to illustrate these dynamics. Throughout, this research draws on international mandates to show that empowering women in environmental management is not only a matter of rights but also of practical effectiveness. Finally, this paper discusses policy implications and advocacy strategies to advance these goals.

Rationale for Integrating Gender in Sustainability Programs

Environmental sustainability and gender equality are inextricably interconnected (Reporter, 2024). Environmental and developmental fallouts are often worse in societies where women and girls do not have equal rights to property. They also have limited access to water, education or decision-making (Khadam et al., 2024). A UNEP report mentions the negative effects of gender inequality on human health, the environment and sustainable development (United Nations Environment Programme, n.d.). As a result, this highlights issues like women's limited access to energy or land ownership. This suggests that programs that are gender-blind will not succeed. In practical terms, disregarding gender is equivalent to ignoring women who actually make up half of the stakeholders in resource management (UN Women, 2022).

Women play critical roles in environmental stewardship around the world. Women are primary managers of household resources like water, fuel and food in several communities (United Nations, n.d.). The Middle East is no exception as across Middle East and North African (MENA) countries, women constitute the majority of the agricultural workforce. They are usually responsible for tasks such as planting and harvesting crops. They are also in charge of storing food, fetching water and collecting firewood for cooking and heating. These essential duties make women intimate experts on local ecosystems (Abdelali-Martini, 2011).

However, women still often have little official power or legal rights over those resources. Women often own less than 5 percent of the agricultural land and face patriarchal practices that limit their decision-making in MENA region (Women and Climate Change in MENA, n.d.). When women are underrepresented in natural resource governance, society loses their valuable knowledge and compromising policies may be less effective.

IUCN mentions that 'women and girls are inherently involved in the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity' however they remain marginalized in environmental decision-making. They are often 'denied access and ownership over natural resources and their benefits' (IUCN NL, n.d.). This exclusion is not only unjust but also impractical. It is proven that when women participate in conservation and planning, outcomes improve like more sustainable management of forests and water. For example, projects that include women in community forestry have shown notably better biodiversity outcomes than male-dominated efforts (Duguma et al., 2022). However, mainstream programs can inadvertently exacerbate inequalities without conscious gender integration.

It is highly essential to bridge these gaps from a biological as well as political standpoint. Everything from local conservation to family nutrition is impacted by gender relations. For instance, women are often the first to detect drying fields or dropping water levels since they collect fuel and water (Md et al., 2022). Drought or land degradation may worsen undetected if policy ignores their observations. "Using a gender-specific approach is an appropriate way to investigate the dynamic relationships between environmental change and gender equality," according to UNEP and OECD publications (OECD, 2023). Stated differently, planning for sustainability that incorporates gender views is more solid.

Additionally, Gender-sensitive planning must abide by legal and ethical standards. Gender mainstreaming in all sectors must be achieved by international accords, ranging from the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) to CEDAW and the 2030 Agenda. This means that environmental projects should take into consideration the relevant demands and contributions of men and women instead of considering people as a monolith. Environmental sustainability and women's rights are directly concomitant in the United Nations' 2016 Global Gender and Environment Outlook and talks about closing gender gaps in access to resources such as land, water, and sanitation is necessary "to strive for a healthier planet for all (Gender and the Environment, n.d.)." Hence, there are two reasons to incorporate gender into sustainability: it is an issue of both scientific efficacy and fairness.

Gender Mainstreaming and Ecological Security

Gender mainstreaming involves integrating gender considerations into policy and project cycles in order to ensure that women and men gain equally and that disparities are not maintained (What Is Gender Mainstreaming, n.d.). It goes beyond token inclusion in environmental programs. Planners often consider the disparities in the ways that environmental concerns impact men and women and then they create gender-responsive budgeting and outreach strategies (United Nations Industrial Development Organization, 2015). Mainstreaming crucially changes procedures rather than just adding women's factors to initiatives. This strategy improves ecological security by guaranteeing that all stakeholders have an equitable part in resource management. Ecosystem governance becomes fairer and more resilient when women's views are heard and considered at every level. "Including women at all stages of the planning and decision-making processes in environmental security

enables more effective and sustainable responses," according to an OSCE report (OSCE, n.d). Women's involvement frequently enhances governance. For example, it has been proven that including women in water management improves hygiene and supply reliability by customizing solutions for local usage and incorporates non-timber resources that men might otherwise neglect (Women: The Key to Food Security, n.d.). Women's participation in water management and conflict resolution was specifically increased through an (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) OSCE project that has trained both male and female water experts in Afghanistan and Central Asia in "gender-sensitive water governance (OSCE, 2023)". Water project decision-making became more inclusive as a result. Gender inclusion thus results in "win-win" outcomes that strengthen ecological stewardship and advance women's rights.

Gender-related programs improve social stability which is actually one of the crucial aspects of ecological security. Communities become more cohesive when women are empowered and their economic and social rights are expanded. On the other hand, women's marginalization can worsen complaints. Societies where women are understated, tend to be tenser and recover from crises more slowly. The OSCE leaders mention that increasing women's involvement in environmental decision-making would have a positive impact on security for everyone as this would pave a path to more sustainable resource management (OSCE, n.d). Rationally, initiatives that grant women land rights or train them as resource managers enhance environmental results and promote equity simultaneously.

Theoretical Perspectives on Gender and Environment

The mutual reinforcement of environmental sustainability and gender equality can be explained by different paradigms. According to ecofeminism, environment is exploited by the same patriarchal mentality that also oppresses women. Factors like caregiving, sustainability and teamwork are often undervalued in societies that prioritize male-dominated norms according to early eco-feminist intellectuals (Miles & Kathryn, 2013). Radical eco-feminists point out that patriarchy views women and the natural world as things to be subjugated and give them "negative or commodifiable attributes," while males stand for authority (Oberoi, n.d.). This dualism promotes the exploitation of women and nature for cheap labor and resources. Eco-feminism contends that by questioning these hierarchical presumptions, elevating women's standing might shift cultural beliefs in favor of stewardship (Swanson, 2015). This relationship is supported by research, which shows that funding females' education and empowerment tends to reduce population growth rates and ease resource pressure. Studies across many countries found that greater gender equality correlates with better environmental performance. Nations where women have more power usually adopt more strict and aggressive climate policies and show faster improvements in land management (United Nations, 2024). In other words, educating and empowering women is important as it yields more impactful outcomes on climate and biodiversity.

Feminist political ecology adds that power relations like gender, class, ethnicity directly shape how communities use and manage natural resources. It talks about the environmental problems that are also social justice problems. For example, women in many societies do not have ownership of the land or water rights despite the fact that they do a lot of farming and resource gathering. Their unpaid labor like fetching water, tending crops, gathering firewood is essential to rural economies but usually unrecognized (Harcourt, 2023). They can

inadvertently increase women's burdens when environmental programs ignore these gendered roles. A classic scenario is that a new irrigation scheme might boost water quotas but if it is designed without consulting local women, it could leave them walking longer distances for household water. Feminist scholars note that gendered division of labor puts women at the forefront of resource procurement which makes them especially vulnerable when resources shrink (Chambers, 2024). An example is that women are typically responsible for daily water and fuel collection and when conflict or climate change damages infrastructure, women's workloads often spike. The Cambridge International Law Journal (CILJ) observes that climate change and conflict 'exert differential impacts across gender lines, compounding vulnerabilities' (Bhatnagar, 2024). In conflict zones, breakdowns in water, sanitation and healthcare disproportionately affect displaced women who remain tied to caregiving and domestic tasks while men may be fighting or searching for work.

Intersectionality further refines this view by noting that "women" are not a single category. Gender also interacts with factors like ethnicity, class and displacement status (Dawson et al., 2023). A poor rural widow, a young refugee woman and an urban businessman will each experience environmental change differently in a post-conflict setting. Intersectional analysis reminds us that the poorest and most marginalized that are often women with multiple disadvantaged identities are the most vulnerable. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) report that women queue for scarce water under threat of violence and adolescent girls frequently drop out of school to help their families survive in Syria's refugee camps (UNICEF, 2021). Recognizing these overlaps leads to more nuanced interventions. In sum, ecofeminism, political ecology and intersectionality all converge on one insight. Patriarchal inequalities hinder both women's rights and ecological health. Conversely, empowering women and challenging unequal power relations creates a virtuous cycle of social and environmental sustainability.

Gendered Impacts in Post-Conflict Environments

Armed conflicts devastate infrastructure and institutions and leave behind environmental crises. These crises affect genders unequally where women often bear a double burden in post-conflict periods. They usually remain primary caretakers of families and managers of scarce resources even as services collapse. For example, everyone feels the loss if a conflict damages a water treatment plant or pumps but women who are typically responsible to fetch household water face it directly. They may have to walk farther for water or use contaminated water that can risk health for themselves and their families. Conflict zones often see increased sexual violence used as a weapon of war which are worsened by shortages of water, food and medicine (UN, 2025). In other words, environmental stress in war from broken sanitation to polluted streams often raises women's exposure to violence and disease. Displaced women in camps or informal settlements frequently endure long lines for aid or water, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation.

Before conflicts, women in many societies are already assigned most household tasks and subsistence production. After conflicts, these tasks become much harder when farmland lies fallow and public utilities fail. Several reports confirm this that in camp settings, women spend many extra hours securing basic needs while men may engage in combat or leave to find work. For instance, a study of the Syrian drought (2006–2010) found that severe drought forced farmers out of which most of them men from the country's breadbasket to urban peripheries

and left the women behind (Royal United Service Institute, 2025). Women then became defacto heads of households and tried to farm amidst scarcity while still managing all domestic duties. This left them exhausted and often isolated. One field survey reported that nearly 60 percent of Syrian women in drought-affected areas had to work more hours like tailoring and petty trading on top of cooking and childcare that led to increased exhaustion (UN Women, 2022). Husbands who stayed typically despised the role reversal and blamed or even assaulted their spouses for "failing" to alleviate the problem. Such tensions highlight how male migration and unemployment can put further strain on the women left to support their families.

On the other hand, men face different challenges in the post-conflict setting. They often have higher rates of combat trauma and greater freedom to migrate or join armed groups. Women are typically left to safeguard family as well as protect food and water for them when men leave or focus on external work. This dynamic played out in Syria when large numbers of men absent or fighting while women managed farms and livestock alone. Communities report women cope with daily scarcities but men then have more ability to collect aid or remittances. Environmental degradation can also introduce new risks in camp settings (Mehchy et al., 2022). For example, women and girls stand on queue for scarce water or firewood frequently face high risks of sexual assault. Studies confirm that environmental disasters like drought or destroyed infrastructure increase gender-based violence in post-conflict settings (World Bank Group, 2023). This results in increase in the workload of women and insecurity grow dramatically.

Sometimes crises open new opportunities despite this dark side. Women may also get the opportunity to enter the workforce or community leadership when traditional roles vanish. Some women in Syria's drought effected areas started small businesses or got wage employment such as sewing or selling food. This in return gave them economic independence. However, these advances frequently resulted in friction without changing gender norms at home (HART UK, 2022). Many couples reported greater domestic stress or violence as wives became breadwinners while still shouldering all household responsibilities. This emphasizes the importance of clearly addressing gender in sustainable recovery. It is important to take women’s needs in account when maintaining clean water systems or electricity grids. It is also highly important that relief programs must include women in decision-making and protection. Recoveries operate best when women have a voice and play their part. For example, planning committees comprised of women prefer to rebuild infrastructure that serves entire communities rather than just traditional male domains.

Gender and Environment: Case Studies from Middle East

Iraq, Decades of war and policies have decimated Iraq's water systems and ecosystems (ICRC, 2025). The recent conflicts and upstream dams in Turkey and Syria have also changes once-thriving wetlands into deserts. This "ecological genocide" had a particularly negative impact on women in Marsh Arab communities. Historically, both men and women worked in the marshes like fishing, herding water buffalo and weaving reeds. However, males began to find jobs in cities or the oil industry and leaving women without a source of income when water supply dried up (National Geographic, n.d). women who used to be active workers and artisans now only limited to the house and their access to clean water, food, and income has decreased.

Even basic water access became a struggle. Residents could no longer rely on local sources when salinity rose and pumps failed. Women in charge of obtaining and managing family water were forced to pay for water supplies or rely on unsafe sources. According to a UN Development Programme assessment, these deprivations have led to extreme poverty and hunger for many women. Iraq's reconstruction has mainly ignored these gendered consequences and focused on fixing roads or clinics without consulting women's organizations (UNDP, n.d). Women must be included in irrigation groups as well as granted land use rights and trained as engineers and technicians as part of gender-sensitive water restoration and land management to increase the ecological security of Iraq. Women's traditional ecological knowledge about grazing patterns, wild plants and other topics can also help in restoration if given a platform.

Syria, Syria experienced one of its worst droughts from 2006 to 2010 which was mostly caused by climate change just before the recent hostilities (UNICEF, 2021). Much of the Northeastern grain belt was lost by this multi-year drought. The war also shattered Syria's water and health systems. Many treatment plants and pipelines were destroyed by bombs and forced civilians especially displaced women and children to rely on unsafe water sources. In camps like al-Hol, women and girls queue daily for meager water rations under the desert sun which exposed them to assault (Human Rights Watch, 2020). A UN report emphasizes that climate and conflict together hit women hardest. Shortages of food, water and medicine typically increase the tensions and leave women more likely to suffer illness and malnutrition (UN DESA, 2024). At the same time, men especially fighters or migrants may return with trauma or continue heavy logging and exploitation and degrade forests and cropland. In a nutshell, Syria's example shows that environmental degradation in conflict zones adds a gendered layer of hardship. Women's workloads and vulnerabilities increase and men's roles often shift toward mobility or aggression. Only by planning reconstruction through a gender lens can stability and ecological recovery be sustainable.

Yemen, Yemen is another case where war and climate together create catastrophe. The ongoing civil war has coincided with extreme droughts and floods. Yemeni women especially in rural areas have long carried the burden of farming and water collection (ICRC, 2022). UNDP Yemen reports that women and girls in Yemen are the most vulnerable by the conflict and have increased impact of displacement, deprivation, and distress (UNDP, n.d). Climate change has also severely impacted Yemeni women's access to water, food and energy. Many women and girls now walk six or more hours each day just to fetch water or otherwise they have to drink contaminated water when pipes run dry. They also bear the burden of food shortages as crop failures and soil erosion make farming unreliable. Pregnant and nursing mothers face acute malnutrition. UN agencies and NGOs have begun centering women in climate adaptation in order to deal with such devastating situation. For example, UNDP built rainwater harvesting schemes and rehabilitated pumps with over half of beneficiaries being women. These efforts allow women to spend fewer hours on drudgery like water collection and more on income-generating or child-care activities.

However, conservative gender norms in Yemen and the chaos of war limit progress. Women often cannot fully control their use or maintenance even when NGOs provide rainwater tanks or clean cookstoves. Women's voices have alarmingly been almost absent from Yemen's peace talks. It means that post-conflict rebuilding rarely reflects their priorities. Without

explicit gender mainstreaming e.g. by training local planners in gender analysis, placing women on water boards, building safe WASH facilities for refugees, Yemen's ecological recovery will remain unequal and fragile. Women shoulder most of the everyday burdens in war-climate crises. They queue for aid, walk for water, care for the sick but still the environmental policies often ignore them.

Policy and Advocacy Implications

These lessons imply that gender-responsive environmental policy is not optional but essential**.** They are extremely important especially in post-conflict contexts. Planners should adopt a dual approach. They must integrate gender analysis into all programs *and* include targeted support for women. For example, a national water project could mainstream gender by assessing and understanding how men and women use water differently and funding women-only technical training or microcredit schemes. This mainstream-plus strategy is endorsed by international frameworks. The Beijing Platform (1995) and recent UN resolutions all call for combining gender mainstreaming with targeted empowerment. In a same way the Paris Climate Agreement as well as the UN Convention on Desertification and successive UN Environment Assembly resolutions explicitly recognize role of women in climate action and the need for gender-responsive approaches. Advocates need to push governments to translate these commitments into action. For instance, climate adaptation funds should require gender impact analyses and equitable benefit-sharing and donors should demand sex-disaggregated data in all programs.

Civil society can pressure for reform of discriminatory laws that worsen women's environmental vulnerability at national and local levels. Land and inheritance laws disadvantage women in many Middle Eastern countries so it is important to secure women's land and water rights because it would boost food security and investment in land health. Education campaigns can challenge norms for example, explaining that women's leadership on irrigation committees or forest associations benefits not just the women but also the entire communities. Training bureaucrats is also crucial so environmental officials need gender-awareness training. Gender specialists should learn environmental management so that projects are truly interdisciplinary.

Specific measures for post-conflict settings include building female-friendly WASH facilities in refugee camps and rebuilt towns. These measures also include establishing quotas or seats for women on natural resource councils or peace-and-reconstruction bodies and provide psychosocial support and legal aid to women facing new burdens. There are promising models like a UN Environment Task Force in Sudan empowered local women to lead resource conflict resolution, ensuring women mediated land and water disputes in a war-torn region (UNEP, n.d). Economic tools also help. Microfinance loans to women farmers or subsidies for clean cookstoves distributed through women's cooperatives can provide both climate and social benefits. Monitoring must be gendered and collecting sex-disaggregated data on program outcomes lets policymakers see where women have benefits and where gaps remain.

All these steps reinforce the OSCE's insight that "more inclusive and therefore more effective environmental policymaking" is definitely possible when women participate fully. In practical terms, unlocking women's engagement produces measurable gains. Community forestry projects with women's committees grow denser forests, and solar energy projects led by women improve reliability and uptake. Highlighting these success stories can motivate the

reluctant policymakers that equality and ecological health go hand in hand and is essential. It is important to understand that gender-sensitive strategies are an investment in ecological security. When women's participation is unlocked, local resource management becomes more sustainable, and communities become more resilient.

Conclusion

Environmental security cannot be achieved on a blank slate of gender-blind planning. A comprehensive view shows that integrating gender at every stage of environmental governance is not just rational and but also necessary**.** Gender mainstreaming increases participation and also leverages women's local knowledge. It ensures such policies that address the needs of all resource users. In post-conflict Middle Eastern contexts from Iraq's vanishing marshes to Syrian fields and Yemeni villages, women have faced the shock of lost water and degraded land in ways that traditional responses fail to resolve. The outcomes are fairer and more lasting when reconstruction and sustainability programs treat women as agents of change. It is highly important to involve women at every stage of environmental planning from local watershed committees to national recovery strategies. Only then can ecological security truly serve everyone. As a result, a secure environment and a secure society are inseparable. Communities and nature alike flourish when women thrive in healthy ecosystems.

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