



Women Have a Strong Stake in Sustainable Development - And Female Clout Can Help to Achieve It

Laura McKinney, Tulane University

In 1987, a United Nations report on “Our Common Future” highlighted the importance of environmental as well as economic and social factors in the development of societies that further human wellbeing. The reason for stressing environmental sustainability is clear. Resources garnered from the environment provide necessities for human life such as food, clothing, and shelter. Harnessing energy and harvesting resources are essential components of production processes that contribute to economic advancement. In fact, without a hospitable and supportive environment, societies cannot exist and economies cannot operate.

My research measures the progress of societies across the world toward achieving sustainable development – and looks closely at how women are affected by ecological realities and in turn can influence nations’ progress toward sustainability. Overall, the news about sustainability is not very good. Many nations are “overshooting” available resources, and women are among those who suffer the most when this occurs. Yet it is also true that women’s political advancement furthers societal progress toward improved ecological balance. Women, in short, are both impacted by and have a strong capacity to influence sustainable social development.

Measuring Sustainability and Overshoot

How much progress has been made toward making societies around the world sustainable since 1987? A helpful first step is to define and measure the concept of sustainable development. “Carrying capacity” is a biophysical accounting of the demands and numbers of species that an ecosystem can support. Populations with demands on nature that exceed carrying capacity are relatively less sustainable than those whose demands are below carrying capacity. “Overshoot” is the term for what happens when population demands exceed carrying capacity. In human terms, a society is in a situation of overshoot when its population growth and economic activities such as excessive consumption violate and compromise the biophysical carrying capacity of its environment. Currently, humanity’s demands on nature are estimated to exceed our carrying capacity by roughly 50%. In other words, humanity currently needs 1.5 planet earths to sustain present levels of consumption, production, and waste generation.

Inspired by sustainability initiatives, researchers have created an intuitive way to measure carrying capacity and gauge if a given society is developing on a sustainable path. Measures of “ecological footprint” quantify the land area necessary to support production and consumption activities and absorb waste – and this can be compared to the nation’s available natural resources, or “biocapacity.” Overshoot – or development on an ecologically unsustainable path – happens whenever a nation’s footprint exceeds its biocapacity. Calculations using 2007 data show that 100 out of 150 nations around the world are overshooting available natural resources. Ranging from developing nations like South Korea, Turkey, and South Africa to very developed nations like the United States, Japan, and various European countries, all nations on such unsustainable paths are contributing to the global overshoot that adversely affects all of humanity.

Why Women Matter

Who suffers from unsustainable forms of development – and who can help turn things around? Women matter on both scores, my research and related studies show. Women are acutely affected by environmental degradation – and they are motivated to act to mitigate it when they gain political advancement. Causal processes go both ways, and the dynamics are complex.

- **Because women are typically charged with seeking supplies to meet the daily needs of their households, they are the first to feel the effects of ecologically unsustainable development.** In nations developing in ways that overshoot natural capacities, croplands become less productive and grazing areas, forests, and fishing grounds contract. Women find it harder and harder to secure the foods, fuels, and fibers their families need to survive and flourish; and they must work longer, travel

farther, and devote more time to collecting household resources. What is more, because women tend to “eat last,” they personally suffer malnutrition and impaired health and vitality, reducing their ability to engage in fruitful economic, political, and educational pursuits.

- If nations developing in ways that degrade nature tend to undercut women’s wellbeing and status, it is also true that **women’s political empowerment can help to further ecosystem conservation and more sustainable forms of development at local, regional, and national levels.** My research shows that, controlling for other factors that matter, nations with higher proportions of women in their legislatures tend to suffer less from unsustainable overshoot.

Why might having more women in national political office matter for sustainability? Various factors documented in an array of research studies may be relevant. For one thing, women tend to have different views of “security” than men. For women, national security encompasses not just protection from violence or the capacity to win wars, but also improvements in health, food safety, and environmental protection. In addition, various scholars have shown that women function in politics and public office a bit differently from men. Females tend to be more effective legislators and consensus builders, and they can be more responsive to constituents.

Empowering Women Can Advance Sustainability

More remains to be learned about the exact ways in which women’s political empowerment and public office holding matter for policymaking at all levels of democratic government. But as we learn more about the mechanisms at work, it seems apparent that if countries around the world want to improve sustainability – and reap the associated gains in human wellbeing – they would be wise to take steps to include more women in politics and government. Policies ranging from gender quotas to special efforts to recruit and train female candidates are being used by various nations to bring more women into public office – and further efforts along such lines can contribute to a more sustainable world. Women’s special stake in sustainability and their unique insights into environmental concerns are sure to prove fundamental to countering threats of environmental degradation that currently threaten all of humanity.

Read more in Laura McKinney, “Gender, Democracy, Development and Overshoot: A Cross-National Analysis.” *Population and Environment* 36, no. 2 (2014): 193-218.