

Women and the Environment

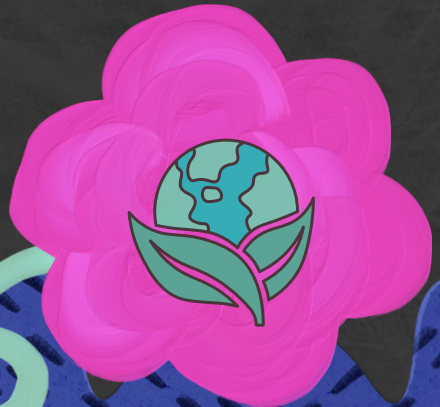
About the Critical Area

The Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) highlights the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation on women and the need to integrate gender-sensitive policies into sustainable development. Women, particularly in rural and low-income communities, often rely on natural resources for daily survival. These factors make them particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, pollution, and deforestation, which compromise their access to essential resources such as food, water, and fuel.

Their exposure to hazardous chemicals in agriculture and informal labor, lack of clean water, and inadequate sanitation pose significant health risks. Environmental disasters further exacerbate these challenges, as women and children constitute the majority of displaced populations, often facing heightened risks of gender-based violence in shelters.



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Despite their essential role in conservation, sustainable agriculture, and renewable energy, women often face exclusion from environmental governance due to structural barriers such as, restricted access to education, land, and financial resources.

Strategic Objective K.1 of the BPfA calls for the active inclusion of women in environmental decision-making at all levels.

Governments should actively ensure women's representation in environmental policy-making, increase access to education in environmental sciences, technology, and economics, and recognize the ecological knowledge of Indigenous women. The BPfA also recommends reducing environmental hazards through clean technology and supporting women-led environmental projects.

The private sector and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are encouraged to provide financial and infrastructural support to help scale these initiatives.



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Strategic Objective K.2 focuses on integrating gender concerns and perspectives into sustainable development policies and programs. Governments must incorporate gender-sensitive approaches in resource management, urban planning, and environmental policy evaluation.

Research institutions should study the impact of climate change on women and assess their contributions to sustainable resource management.

Expanding professional training programs in environmental fields will equip women with the skills needed to participate in green industries. Infrastructure planning and public service design must also consider women's needs to ensure safe, accessible, and sustainable environments.



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To create lasting institutional change, **Strategic Objective K.3 emphasizes the need to assess the impact of environmental and development policies on women.** Governments, international organizations, and NGOs must establish gender-sensitive databases to track the impact of environmental policies on women and use this data to inform future decision-making.

Strengthening international enforcement of environmental agreements and eliminating hazardous waste practices that disproportionately impact women are also key recommendations. Increased financial investments in women-led sustainability initiatives will promote long-term economic resilience. Furthermore, women in agriculture, fisheries, and resource management need improved access to eco-friendly technologies, training, and market opportunities.

A comprehensive approach to environmental governance must prioritize women's leadership, as outlined in the BPfA. Ensuring women's participation in climate action, policy-making, and resource management is essential not only for addressing environmental risks but also for fostering long-term resilience and equitable development. By implementing these strategic actions, governments, international organizations, and civil society can position women as key leaders in sustainability rather than passive victims of environmental degradation.



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Canada's Progress Towards the Goal

Canada has taken steps to align with the BPfA's strategic objectives by integrating gender considerations into environmental policies and programs. The Feminist International Assistance Policy acknowledges women's roles in environmental stewardship and supports developing nations in transitioning to low-carbon, climate-resilient economies (Government of Canada, 2017).

Domestically, the Impact Assessment Act mandates the evaluation of sex, gender, and identity factors in environmental project assessments, ensuring that environmental policies consider their effects on women and marginalized groups (Government of Canada, 2019). However, despite these policy advancements, significant challenges remain in achieving gender equity in environmental governance and addressing environmental injustices disproportionately impacting women, particularly Indigenous women.



Photography
Courtesy
APTN News

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Environmental Injustice and Gendered Impacts

Industrial pollution and the government's subsequent inaction have allowed environmental degradation to disproportionately impact Indigenous and marginalized communities, exacerbating health, economic, and social disparities.

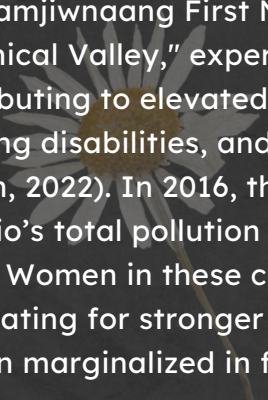
The Grassy Narrows First Nation in Ontario has endured mercury contamination since Dryden Chemicals Ltd. discharged industrial waste into the English-Wabigoon River system between 1962 and 1970.

This contamination devastated the community's primary food source, causing widespread mercury poisoning, with 90 percent of residents exhibiting symptoms (Ecojustice, 2022). The closure of commercial fisheries in 1970 led to a surge in unemployment from 5 percent to 95 percent within a year (Ecojustice, 2022).

Women in affected communities bear a disproportionate burden as caregivers, responsible for managing the long-term health effects of toxic exposure on their families.

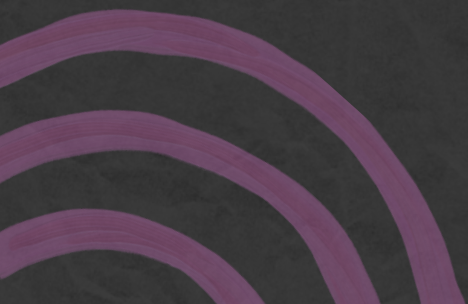


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The Aamjiwnaang First Nation in Ontario, located within "Chemical Valley," experiences high levels of industrial pollution, contributing to elevated rates of asthma, reproductive issues, learning disabilities, and cancer (McGill Journal of Law and Health, 2022). In 2016, this region accounted for 10percent of Ontario's total pollution output (McGill Journal of Law and Health, 2022). Women in these communities play critical roles in advocating for stronger environmental protections, yet they remain marginalized in formal decision-making processes.

Access to clean drinking water remains a significant environmental justice issue in Canada. As of February 2022, 29 Indigenous communities remained under long-term drinking water advisories, with gastrointestinal infection rates 26 times higher than the national average (McGill Journal of Law and Health, 2022). The BPfA emphasizes the need to reduce environmental hazards through clean technologies and ensure access to sustainable water and sanitation infrastructure for marginalized groups. However, the persistence of water crises in Indigenous communities highlights a gap between Canada's policy commitments and implementation.



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Women's Representation in Canada's Environmental Sector

Women remain underrepresented in Canada's environmental workforce, limiting their influence in decision-making processes. In 2021, women comprised 28.6 percent of the environmental and clean technology (ECT) workforce, an increase from 26.4 percent in 2009.

However, they continue to face a significant gender pay gap, earning 16.3 percent less than their male counterparts (Statistics Canada, 2024). Women also held only 26.6 percent of management positions in the ECT sector, earning 18.2 percent less than men in similar roles (Statistics Canada, 2024).

These statistics underscore the structural barriers preventing women from fully participating in environmental governance, despite the BPfA's call for increased access to education in science, technology, and economics to empower women in sustainability fields.



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Youth Engagement

Youth play a crucial role in advancing gender-responsive environmental policies and addressing environmental injustices. One of the most effective ways for young people to contribute is through advocacy and grassroots activism.

Joining or forming organizations focused on climate action, Indigenous rights, and environmental justice allows youth to amplify marginalized voices, push for policy changes, and hold governments and corporations accountable.

Platforms like the Fridays for Future movement, Indigenous Climate Action, and the Canadian Youth Climate Coalition provide opportunities for young activists to engage in protests, policy advocacy, and community-based environmental initiatives.

Additionally, youth can advocate for gender-sensitive environmental policies by attending public consultations, engaging with policymakers, and supporting legislation that aligns with the BPfA's call for greater inclusion of women in environmental decision-making.



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Another impactful way for youth to contribute is through education and capacity-building. Pursuing studies in environmental science, sustainable development, and gender studies equips young people with the knowledge needed to develop innovative solutions and influence policy.

Many universities and non-profit organizations offer internships, fellowships, and mentorship programs to support youth in environmental leadership. Programs such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network - Youth Initiative and Canada's Environmental Youth Alliance provide training and networking opportunities for young leaders looking to advance environmental sustainability and social justice.

Beyond formal education, youth can participate in community-driven projects such as urban greening initiatives, sustainable farming programs, and renewable energy development, which align with the BPfA's goals of empowering women in environmental conservation and resource management.



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Digital activism is another powerful tool for youth involvement. Social media platforms can be used to raise awareness, mobilize support, and share educational resources on the intersection of gender and environmental justice.

Creating or supporting campaigns that promote access to clean water, Indigenous land rights, and climate justice policies can help drive systemic change.

Engaging in crowdfunding efforts to support women-led environmental initiatives or pressuring corporations to adopt sustainable and ethical practices are additional ways to create impact.

By combining grassroots activism, policy advocacy, education, and digital engagement, young people can play a vital role in advancing environmental sustainability while ensuring that gender equity remains central to climate solutions.

