

# An Analytical Perspective on Gender Stereotypes and Sustainability: A Sociological Study within the Context of Sustainable Development

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**Abstract** - This paper explores how women, gender, and stereotypes relate to sustainability from a sociological perspective within sustainable development. It argues that sustainable development is not solely an environmental or economic process but is deeply embedded in social structures shaped by gender norms and power relations. The intersection of women, society and sustainability cannot be fully understood without critically engaging with the sociological narrative that shapes women's roles and opportunities. Women play a crucial role in achieving sustainable development, yet gender stereotypes often limit their participation and recognition. From a sociological perspective, sustainability is not only an environmental or economic concern but also a social one shaped by power relations, cultural norms and gender roles. We all know that Gender rather than being a biological given, is widely understood as a social construction, produced through historical, cultural, political and ideological processes. Early feminist scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir emphasised that womanhood is socially constructed rather than biologically determined (The Second sex, 1949, p-1.2). Traditionally, women are stereotyped as caregivers, homemaker, and passive supporters, while men are viewed as decision-makers and leaders. These stereotypes restrict women's access to education, resources, technology, and leadership positions, which are essential for sustainable development. In Assamese society, deeply embedded gender stereotypes continue to influence women's access to education, scientific engagement, and public participation, which play a significant role in shaping collective consciousness. Ongoing gender stereotypes that define women primarily as caregivers and men as decision-makers still hinder women's opportunities for education, resources, technology and leadership roles, ultimately, constraining their potential impact on sustainability efforts. Despite these limitations, women play a critical role in managing natural resources, sustaining household livelihoods and preserving indigenous environmental knowledge, particularly at the community level. However, patriarchal social systems often render these contributions invisible or undervalued. Drawing on sociological theory and the objectives of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals especially, SDG 5 on gender

equality, the paper highlights the necessity of challenging gender stereotypes to achieve inclusive and effective sustainable development. It emphasises that women's empowerment through education, economic participation and political inclusion strengthens social equity, community resilience and long-term sustainability. The study concludes that a gender-sensitive approach to sustainable development is essential, recognising women as active agents of change rather than passive beneficiaries, and is vital for building a more just, equitable and sustainable society.

**Keywords:** Women, Gender stereotypes, Sustainability, Sustainable development, sociology, Gender equality, Empowerment

## I. INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development has become a central paradigm in global policy and academic discourse, particularly since the adoption of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These goals emphasize the interconnectedness of environmental sustainability, economic development, and social inclusion. Gender equality is acknowledged both as an independent goal and as an integral factor that promotes sustainable development across various sectors. Despite this recognition, women continue to face structural inequalities and deeply embedded stereotypes that constrain their participation in sustainability-related decision-making and innovation.

Most dictionaries define 'gender' as the state of being male or female, essentially referring to a person's sex. Therefore, gender is about women and men. However, the meaning of the word has expanded. Now, gender also refers to the socially constructed roles, responsibilities, norms, expectations and stereotypes accorded to women and men, it varies from culture to culture and over time. The definition of Gender has even been the subject of exhaustive debate, including at a special United Nations Session in connection

with the Fourth world conference on Women in Beijing, Gender refers to a set of qualities and behaviors expected from a female or male by society. UN Office of the special Advisor on gender issues and advancement of women has defined Gender as the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female and the relationship between women and men. (Anil Kumar Thakur, Dalip Kumar, Gender Empowerment and Development) on the other hand the word ‘Stereotype’ refers to a generalized belief about a particular category of people. Stereotypes are representative of a society’s collectives’ knowledge of customs, myths, ideas, religions, and sciences. It is within this knowledge that an individual develops a stereotype or a belief about a certain group. Social psychologists feel that the stereotype is one part of an individual’s social knowledge, as a result of their knowledge, or lack of knowledge, the stereotype has an effect on their social behavior. Stereotypic behavior can be linked to the way that the stereotype is learned, transmitted, and changed and this is part of the socialization process as well part of an individual’s social knowledge, or lack of knowledge. It is related to cognitive processes because we have different expectations for female and male behavior and the traditional gender roles help to sustain gender stereotypes (Sumit Dutta, Gender Sociology).

From a sociological perspective, gender stereotypes function as social constructs that assign roles, behaviors, and expectations based on perceived biological differences. These stereotypes often portray women as caregivers, passive beneficiaries, or secondary actors, while men are positioned as leaders, innovators, and decision-makers. In the context of sustainable development, such assumptions can marginalize women’s knowledge, labor, and leadership, even though women are frequently at the forefront of environmental stewardship, community resilience, and sustainable livelihoods.

Objectives:

This paper explores the complex relationship between women, gender stereotypes, and sustainability. It seeks to answer three central questions:

1. In what ways do gender stereotypes influence the roles of women in sustainable development?

2. In what ways do women challenge and transform sustainability practices?
3. Why is addressing gender stereotypes crucial for bridging science, society, and sustainability?

By addressing these questions, the paper contributes to sociological debates on gender and development while offering insights relevant to policymakers, researchers, and practitioners.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Feminist Sociology and Gender Theory

Famous Definitions of feminism given by famous feminist

1. Simone de Beauvoir (1949)

Definition: *"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."*

This definition from *The Second Sex* emphasizes that gender is a social construct rather than a biological destiny. De Beauvoir laid the philosophical foundation for modern feminist theory by showing how society creates and enforces gender roles. (de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*, 1949)

2. bell hooks (1984)

Definition: *"Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression."*

bell hooks redefined feminism not as anti-male, but as anti-sexism. Her inclusive and intersectional approach broadened the feminist movement beyond just white middle-class women. (hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. South End Press, 1984)

3. Betty Friedan (1963)

Definition: *"Feminism is the belief that women should have equal rights, opportunities, and freedoms as men."*

Though not worded as a strict definition, Friedan’s work highlighted the problem of gender roles and domestic confinement, especially in middle-class America. (Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1963)

4. Judith Butler (1990)

Definition: *"Gender is not something that one is, it is something one does, an act... a doing."*

Butler’s view moves feminism toward post-structuralism, arguing that gender is performative and socially constructed. This radically changed feminist and queer theory. (Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990)

Feminist sociology provides a critical lens for understanding how power relations, social structures, and cultural norms produce and reproduce gender inequalities. Gender is viewed not as a biological given but as a social construct shaped by institutions such as the family, education, labor markets, and the state. Feminist theorists argue that women's marginalization is sustained through symbolic representations, unequal access to resources, and exclusion from decision-making processes.

In the sustainability context, feminist sociology highlights how environmental and development policies often rely on gender-neutral assumptions that obscure unequal social realities. Such approaches risk reinforcing stereotypes by treating women as a homogeneous group or as instruments for achieving sustainability goals rather than as autonomous agents.

### 2.2 Social Role Theory and Stereotypes

Social role theory explains gender stereotypes as outcomes of historically assigned roles to men and women. Women are often associated with communal roles—caregiving, nurturing, and household management—while men are linked to agentic roles such as leadership and technical expertise. These stereotypes influence perceptions of competence and suitability for roles in science, technology, and environmental governance.

In sustainable development, this dynamic can lead to women being overrepresented in unpaid or informal sustainability work (such as water collection or waste management) while remaining underrepresented in scientific research, policy formulation, and technological innovation.

### 2.3 Sustainability and Social Justice

Sustainability is increasingly understood as inseparable from social justice. Sociological approaches emphasize that environmental problems and their solutions are socially embedded and unevenly distributed. Gender inequality intersects with class, race, and geography, shaping differential vulnerabilities to climate change and environmental degradation. Therefore, addressing gender stereotypes is not merely a matter of representation but a fundamental requirement for equitable and effective sustainability.

## III. WOMEN AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

### 3.1 Women as Key Actors in Sustainability

Across the globe, women play critical roles in managing natural resources, maintaining household food security, and sustaining community well-being. In rural and indigenous communities, women often possess extensive ecological knowledge related to agriculture, water management, and biodiversity conservation. Sociologically, this positions women as central actors in sustainability at the local level. However, their contributions are frequently undervalued or rendered invisible due to gendered divisions of labor. Women's work in sustainability is often framed as an extension of their "natural" caregiving roles rather than as skilled, strategic, and innovative labor.

### 3.2 Stereotypes and Structural Barriers

Gender stereotypes intersect with institutional barriers to limit women's participation in sustainability governance. These barriers include limited access to education in science and technology, exclusion from land ownership and financial resources, and underrepresentation in political and scientific institutions. Stereotypes that portray women as less rational or technically competent further justify their exclusion from leadership roles.

From a sociological standpoint, these patterns reflect broader systems of patriarchy that shape knowledge production and policy priorities. As a result, sustainability initiatives may fail to incorporate diverse perspectives, leading to less effective or socially unjust outcomes.

On the other hand The underrepresentation of women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields has significant implications for sustainability research. Gender stereotypes discourage girls and women from pursuing scientific careers, while institutional cultures often marginalize those who do. This limits the diversity of perspectives shaping sustainability science.

Integrating women into scientific research is not only a matter of equity but also of epistemic diversity. Sociological studies show that diverse research teams are more likely to produce innovative and socially relevant solutions to complex problems such as climate change. Women's experiential knowledge, particularly at the community level, represents a crucial bridge between scientific expertise and societal needs. Participatory sustainability initiatives that include women in planning and implementation

tend to be more responsive and resilient. Such approaches challenge top-down models of development and recognize women as co-creators of sustainable futures.

Discussion: Sociological theories explain how social structures, power relations, and cultural norms shape gender roles in society. Gender stereotypes portray women as caregivers, emotionally dependent, and less suited for leadership or technical work. These stereotypes restrict women's access to resources and opportunities, directly affecting sustainable development. The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) recognize gender equality as central to achieving inclusive and sustainable growth.

#### Sociological Perspectives Linked with SDGs

##### 1. Functionalist Theory and SDGs

Functionalist thinkers argue that gender roles exist to maintain social stability.

- Women are assigned domestic and nurturing roles.
- Men dominate economic and political spheres.

SDG Link:

- SDG 5: Gender Equality – Traditional role division contradicts this goal.
- SDG 4: Quality Education – Gendered expectations limit girls' educational aspirations.
- SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth – Women's confinement to unpaid care work restricts economic productivity.

Functionalism explains role division but fails to support sustainable development that requires gender-inclusive participation.

##### 2. Conflict Theory (Marxist) and SDGs

Conflict theory highlights inequality and exploitation in social systems.

- Gender stereotypes justify women's unpaid or underpaid labor.
- Patriarchal control over resources disadvantages women.

SDG Link:

- SDG 1: No Poverty – Feminization of poverty results from economic exclusion.
- SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities – Gender-based power imbalance sustains inequality.
- SDG 8: Decent Work – Wage gaps and informal labor affect women disproportionately.

Sustainable development cannot be achieved without restructuring power relations and economic systems.

##### 3. Feminist Theory and SDGs

Feminist sociology directly challenges patriarchy and gender stereotypes.

- Gender roles are socially constructed.
- Women are excluded from decision-making processes.

SDG Link:

- SDG 5: Gender Equality – Core feminist objective.
- SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions – Women's political participation strengthens governance.
- SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals – Inclusion of women enhances collective action.

Ecofeminism & SDGs:

- SDG 13: Climate Action
- SDG 15: Life on Land  
Women's ecological knowledge supports sustainable environmental practices.

##### 4. Symbolic Interactionism and SDGs

This theory focuses on everyday interactions that shape identity.

- Gender stereotypes are learned through socialization.
- Media and language reinforce unequal expectations.

SDG Link:

- SDG 4: Quality Education – Gender-sensitive education challenges stereotypes.
- SDG 5: Gender Equality – Transforming attitudes is essential for empowerment.

☞ Changing micro-level interactions leads to long-term sustainable social change.

##### Gender Stereotypes as Barriers to SDGs

Gender stereotypes negatively affect progress toward multiple SDGs by:

- Limiting women's access to education (SDG 4)
- Increasing poverty and economic dependency (SDG 1 & 8)
- Excluding women from leadership and governance (SDG 16)
- Undermining health and well-being (SDG 3)
- Weakening climate resilience (SDG 13)

## Women's Empowerment as a Driver of Sustainable Development

Empowering women contributes directly to:

- Poverty reduction
- Improved health and education outcomes
- Sustainable agriculture and resource management
- Inclusive and resilient communities

This aligns with the SDG principle of "Leaving No One Behind."

## Conclusion

Sociological theories reveal that gender stereotypes are socially constructed and embedded in institutions that limit women's participation in development. The SDGs recognize gender equality not as a separate goal but as a foundation for achieving all other goals. Sustainable development is impossible without dismantling gender stereotypes and ensuring women's equal participation in economic, political, and environmental spheres.

Sociological theory helps us understand how society is structured, how power operates, and how inequalities—especially gender inequalities—are created and maintained. Gender stereotypes about women (such as being caregivers, emotionally weak, or suited only for domestic roles) are socially constructed ideas that limit women's participation in economic, political, and environmental spheres. These stereotypes directly affect sustainable development, which depends on social inclusion, equality, and long-term well-being for all.

### 1. Functionalist Perspective

Functionalist theorists like Talcott Parsons view society as a system of interrelated parts working together for stability.

- Women are traditionally assigned expressive roles (caregiving, nurturing).
- Men are assigned instrumental roles (breadwinning, decision-making).
- Gender stereotypes are seen as "functional" for social order.

Link to Sustainable Development:

While functionalism explains traditional role division, it limits women's contribution to development by confining them to unpaid domestic labor. Sustainable development requires women's full participation in education, work, governance, and

environmental management—something rigid functional roles fail to support.

### 2. Conflict Theory (Marxist Perspective)

Conflict theorists see society as structured by inequality and power struggles.

- Gender stereotypes are tools used by patriarchal and capitalist systems to exploit women's labor.
- Women perform unpaid or underpaid work, reinforcing economic inequality.
- Control over resources and decision-making remains male-dominated.

Link to Sustainable Development:

Gender inequality slows development by:

- Reducing women's access to education and employment
  - Increasing poverty and dependency
  - Excluding women from policy and sustainability planning
- True sustainable development requires dismantling these power imbalances.

### 3. Feminist Theory

Feminist sociology directly challenges gender stereotypes and patriarchy.

- Stereotypes are socially constructed, not biological.
- Women are marginalized in political, economic, and environmental decision-making.
- Different strands (liberal, radical, socialist, ecofeminism) emphasize different forms of oppression.

Ecofeminism specifically links:

- Exploitation of women with exploitation of nature
- Women's traditional ecological knowledge with sustainability

Link to Sustainable Development:

Feminist theory supports:

- Gender equality (SDG 5)
  - Women's leadership in sustainability
  - Inclusive development policies
- It argues that sustainable development is impossible without women's empowerment.

### 4. Symbolic Interactionism

This micro-level theory focuses on everyday interactions and meanings.

- Gender stereotypes are learned through family, media, education, and language.
- Women internalize expectations like being “submissive” or “self-sacrificing.”
- These stereotypes shape aspirations and life choices.

Link to Sustainable Development:

Challenging stereotypes at the interactional level:

- Encourages girls’ education and leadership
- Promotes shared domestic responsibilities
- Builds sustainable social attitudes across generations

#### 5. Women, Gender Stereotypes, and Sustainable Development

Gender stereotypes affect sustainable development by:

- Limiting women’s economic independence
- Increasing health and education gaps
- Excluding women from environmental decision-making
- Reinforcing intergenerational inequality

Sustainable development goals emphasize:

- Gender equality
- Inclusive growth
- Social justice
- Environmental sustainability

Women play key roles in:

- Poverty reduction
- Sustainable agriculture
- Climate change adaptation
- Community development

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Sociological theories reveal that gender stereotypes are not natural but socially produced and maintained through institutions and power structures. These stereotypes restrict women’s roles and undermine sustainable development. Addressing gender inequality through education, policy reform, and cultural change is essential for achieving long-term, inclusive, and sustainable development. Empowering women is not only a matter of justice—it is a prerequisite for sustainability.

When women occupy leadership roles in sustainability initiatives, they actively disrupt gender stereotypes. These practices demonstrate that women are not merely beneficiaries of sustainable development but leaders, innovators, and decision-

makers. Sociologically, this transformation occurs through both structural change and symbolic redefinition of gender roles.

The analysis reveals that gender stereotypes remain a significant obstacle to achieving sustainable development. While women are central to sustainability practices, their contributions are constrained by social norms and institutional inequalities. Addressing these challenges requires more than increasing women’s participation; it demands a fundamental rethinking of how sustainability is conceptualized and implemented.

Bridging science, society, and sustainability necessitates gender-sensitive frameworks that recognize power relations and promote inclusivity. Sociological insights highlight that sustainability is not solely a technical challenge but a social process shaped by values, norms, and inequalities.

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