

# Women will lead the way to a SUSTAINABLE TOMORROW

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International Women's Day (IWD) is now celebrated as a global day of women's achievements across the political, economic, social, and cultural spheres. It is also a day for taking action against discrimination, inequality, and injustice that women face all around the world.

It is worth remembering that International Women's Day did not start from the UN declaration in 1975. It originated from the women's movement in the United States and other countries on issues of unequal pay, working hours, and voting rights in the early 1900s. March 8 was declared as a special day for women by Clara Zetkin, the German socialist leader, in 1910. In the beginning, IWD was mostly observed by socialist groups and was popular in the erstwhile Soviet Union and other socialist countries. For the women in the United States, where anti-socialism was rampant at the time, such ideological association was problematic. For them, the declaration by the United Nations in 1975 in the context of women's rights and world peace was more agreeable.

Every year, the UN comes up with a theme to mark the day. However, for decades, women's role in agriculture was ignored, until the climate crisis started appearing more as a reality than a prediction by the scientists. Accordingly, the theme of IWD 2022 is "Gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow".

After the failure of the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to bring about worthwhile agreements on climate change, the role of women for a sustainable tomorrow surfaced more clearly to the policymakers. They were forced to recognise women's invaluable contributions towards building a sustainable future for all.

The UN scientific report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in August 2021 boldly said, "It is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, oceans, and land".

The Paris climate agreement in

2015 aimed to keep the rise in global temperatures well below 2°C this century and to pursue efforts to keep it under 1.5°C. Accordingly, the IPCC report argued that both targets will be important to achieve within this century unless huge cuts in carbon emission take place. Unfortunately, the patriarchal global system led by the rich countries and the fossil fuel industries did not commit to reducing their share of carbon emissions by 2040.

Earlier, the UN Food Systems Summit, held on 23 September 2021, had a strong consensus to secure the healthy life of people and the planet. The farmers' groups, mostly led by small-scale and family farmers' organisations, raised concerns about the attempts of the corporate and industrial food chains with digital and biotechnologies to take control of the global food systems, despite the lack of sustainability of these processes and harm caused to nature by technological fixes in the past. But this was another concern that the world leaders ignored, and the demands for food sovereignty by millions of farmers in Asia, Africa, and Latin America remained unaddressed.

According to a study titled 'Which farms feed the world and have farmland become more concentrated?', family farms produce roughly 80 percent of the world's food in terms of value. It further states, "Five of every six farms in the world consist of less than two hectares, operate only around 12 percent of all agricultural land, and over the years, these small-scale farms have been injected with modern conventional chemical-based agriculture with the use of fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides (not to mention machines that require the use of fossil fuels). As a result,

they have suffered the loss of seeds and biodiversity.

It often leads to women becoming redundant family members and facing violence in their families, with many being forced to migrate to cities for factory jobs. Biodiversity-based farming requires women to have control over seeds and more command over the agrarian production cycles. Command over the production cycle also ensures her power within the household as well as in the community. So the shift to sustainable agriculture was always needed and is now finally being encouraged as a rational policy to mitigate the negative impacts of climate change.

Sustainable agriculture increases the participation of women more directly in agriculture, both in decision-making as well as in the use and generation of valuable knowledge. Women are empowered not only theoretically, but also in concrete agrarian practices and relations that are necessary to run a biodiverse agro-ecological production system.

In Bangladesh, women mostly rely on small-scale farming, cattle, and poultry rearing. The distress caused by our changing climate in the last few years has hit small farmers, particularly women, the most with loss of crops. Farmers depending on HYV and hybrid seeds along with the use of chemicals have faced harsh consequences as these unsustainable practices could not cope with the climate vulnerabilities.

Meanwhile, the monocultural and industrial cash crop-based production has contributed to the worsening of the climate conditions. The biodiversity-based agricultural practice known as Nayakrishi Andolon, an initiative of farmers since

1992, has shown that local variety seeds (rice and other crops) are more resistant and capable of withstanding climate vulnerabilities than the laboratory-based modern seeds. Many of these flood-resistant, drought-resistant, and salinity-resistant varieties are preserved by women, which can survive in climate-stressed conditions. Farmers therefore ought to follow mixed and diverse cropping for enhancing biodiversity for both cultivated and uncultivated plants and other food sources.

The women of Bangladesh have demonstrated that they can lead a livelihood movement that is not dependent on fossil fuel energy or destructive masculine technologies. They strongly nurture a deep sense of ethical responsibility to nature and the planet. Their practice in the maintenance and regeneration of diversity in seeds, crops, livestock, and poultry as part of

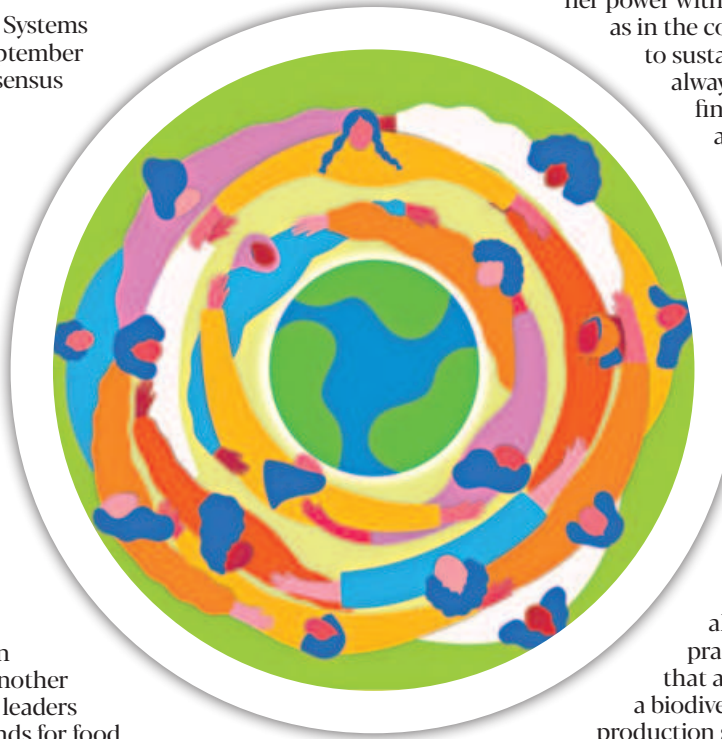
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constituting an ecological lifestyle is the key to building a sustainable future. A major threat here comes from the masculine notion of technology and the patriarchal desire to control, consume and destroy nature.

Adaptation and mitigation of climate change disaster is not a policy, governance, or technological issue to women, but an ethical and political issue that demands a collective wake up call for nature: are we going to destroy the planet and our dwelling place on earth? Or must we reclaim our feminine ethics of caring and regenerating life and livelihood in the face of industrial assault of fossil fuel-based civilisation?

This is the life-affirming question that we must respond to today.

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▲ An imagery illustrating the 2022 theme "Gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow" developed by Burcu Köleli.



Firoza (M) with her family members

PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

## The worst affected, as always

**The government does not have any specific strategy to stop climate-induced migration, which is urgently needed.**

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"I miss my village. But our house was eroded by the Shakbaria river. We still wanted to live there. But there is no work, so we had to move," she said.

Asked, Aser Ali Moral, chair of Koyra's Dakshin Bedkashi Union, told The Daily Star that about 3,000 people from his Dakshin Bedkashi Union have moved to other places following the recent cyclone. "After the cyclones, many people moved from their village. A few of them return, while the majority don't," said Aser Ali. According to Upazila Statistics Office, the population of Koyra Upazila in 2009 was 1,93,656. In 2021, the upazila's population was only 95,292. The population in Koyra increased only by 1,636 people in 12 years, with a rate much lower than the national average population growth rate.

The cases are the same in the adjacent three upazilas of Shymnagar, Kaliganj, Ashashuni of Sathkhira district.

"During a post-Aila survey on internal migration in 2009, we found that around 1,20,000 people were displaced from Dacope, Koyra and Paikgacha of Khulna and Shymnagar and Ashashuni upazila of Sathkhira district," said Hasan Mehedi, Chief executive of Coastal Livelihood and Environmental Action Network (CLEAN).

"After Amphan, we surveyed Koyra and Shymnagar again, and found that around 18,000 to 21,000 people were forced to migrate from the area," said Hasan Mehedi.

"The government does not have any specific strategy to stop climate-induced migration, which is urgently needed," he added.

Khushi Kabir, coordinator of the non-government organisation Nijera Kori, said the southern part of Bangladesh has become the most vulnerable area in the country.

"It's true the salinity problem has increased due to climate change. But most of the problems are human-induced. The salinity increased due to cultivation of shrimps," she said.

Since 1980, an upwards trend of shrimp cultivation has been noticed in many areas of the region. This has contributed to the reduction of soil fertility. Non-saline sources of drinking water are on the shrink as well, she added.

"And women are the worst sufferers due to all these. They have to maintain their household chores, fetch drinking water and also work outside, mostly in these shrimp farms, to feed their families," she said.

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