Narrative Review Article

The Eco-Gender Gap: Psychological, Social, and Economic Drivers of Women's Leadership in Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

This project investigates why women entrepreneurs are disproportionately engaged in sustainability, a phenomenon often described as the "eco-gender gap." While women are consistently more likely than men to embed sustainable practices into their businesses, the underlying causes of this divide are complex and multi-dimensional. This paper is structured as a narrative review drawing from peer-reviewed research in psychology, gender studies, and business, as well as industry talks and case studies, this review examines three primary drivers: psychological motivations, social and cultural influences, and economic conditions. Psychologically, women often draw on values such as empathy, responsibility, and long-term thinking, which make sustainability both meaningful and rewarding. Socially, sustainability is frequently coded as "feminine," reinforcing women's participation while discouraging men from engaging in practices perceived as unmanly. Economically, consumer demand often rewards women-led sustainable businesses, but barriers such as limited access to venture capital and institutional support prevent women from scaling these ventures as effectively as men. By synthesizing evidence across these domains, this project highlights both the opportunities and burdens embedded in women's environmental leadership. Ultimately, it argues that sustainability must be reframed as a shared responsibility across genders, ensuring that women's disproportionate contributions are recognized, supported, and balanced by broader participation.

Keywords: Eco-gender gap; Sustainable entrepreneurship; Women entrepreneurs; Environmental leadership; Psychological motivations; Social norms; Sustainability; Gender

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, sustainability has emerged not only as an environmental issue but also as a representation of ethical leadership and entrepreneurship. As concerns over climate change, pollution, and overall environmental harm increase, businesses are under growing pressure to adopt sustainable practices. As the global climate crisis intensifies, environmental threats, from escalating greenhouse gas emissions to economic losses and human vulnerability, are mounting at an alarming pace. The effects are already being felt: nearly half of the global population, about 3.6 billion people, are considered highly vulnerable to climate change impacts, according to the United Nations (1). At the same time, environmental stressors such as pollution, land degradation, and water scarcity now affect roughly 90% of the world's population, as the World Bank warns in its most recent global assessment. This mounting crisis has sparked significant shifts in the corporate world. More than half of business leaders across 15 countries,

52% according to a 2025 Financial Times survey, plan to relocate their operations or revamp supply chains within the next five years to secure better access to renewable energy (2). Consumers are signaling change, too. Nearly 90% report they've experienced climate impacts firsthand, and they're willing to pay close to 10% more for sustainably produced goods, according to PwC's 2024 Voice of the Consumer Survey (3). Businesses are facing a new pressure to lead the sustainability transition. Rising emissions, unequal climate impacts, and shifting consumer and investor priorities are reshaping corporate expectations and reframing sustainability not as a value, but as a strategic business practice.

Women-led companies often place sustainability at the center of their mission rather than treating it as a secondary concern, reflecting a broader trend in which women are leading the charge in rethinking how business interacts with the environment. For instance, the fashion sector, which is responsible for about 10% of global carbon emissions, according to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, has seen women entrepreneurs create sustainable alternatives such as plant-based fabrics and closed-loop production systems to directly address the industry's massive environmental footprint (4). These examples illustrate how women are not only participating in but actively shaping the global sustainability movement through business innovation. This trend raises pressing questions about the underlying causes of the gender divide in sustainable entrepreneurship. Women's greater engagement with sustainability is not a coincidence, but is rooted in a combination of psychological, social, and economic influences. Social expectations about gender, particularly the idea that women are naturally more caring or nurturing, have framed women as environmental stewards, which shapes how sustainability is both advertised and carried out in practice. As a result, sustainability is often coded as feminine, with marketing campaigns disproportionately targeting women as consumers of eco-friendly products, as discussed by Johansen (2021) in her YouTube lecture on sustainability and gender (5). Exploring the intersection of psychological values, social norms, and economic realities is essential to understanding not only why women are more engaged in sustainability but also how this engagement can be changed from an unequal responsibility into a model for more inclusive, shared environmental leadership.

PSYCHOLOGICAL MOTIVATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE BEHAVIOR

Psychological motivations are a crucial factor in explaining why women disproportionately prioritize sustainability in entrepreneurship. As summarized in Table 1, psychological drivers such as empathy,

Table 1. Key drivers across psychological, social and cultural, and economic domains that influence women's leadership in sustainability. *Psychological factors such as empathy, responsibility, and long-term thinking encourage women to integrate sustainability as a core ethical priority, while also framing environmental responsibility as an expected obligation. Social and cultural drivers, including gender norms and the feminization of sustainability, normalize women's engagement in sustainable practices but reinforce unequal distributions of sustainable labor. Economic drivers, such as consumer demand, perceptions of leadership effectiveness, and access to capital, reward sustainability-focused leadership while limiting women's ability to scale impact due to funding gaps and institutional barriers.*

Domain	Key Drivers	How They Influence Sustainability	Resulting Tension
Psychological	Empathy, responsibility, long-term thinking, values-based identity	Encourage women to integrate sustainability as a core ethical and leadership priority	Empower women as sustainability leaders while framing environmental responsibility as an expected obligation
Social and Cultural	Gender norms, feminization of sustainability, caregiving expectations	Normalize women's engagement in sustainable practices and discourage men from behaviors perceived as feminine	Increase visibility of women's leadership while reinforcing unequal distribution of sustainability labor
Economic	Consumer demand, leadership effectiveness, access to capital	Reward sustainability-focused business models and female leadership through market approval	Limit women's ability to scale impact due to funding gaps and institutional barriers

values-oriented thinking, and long-term responsibility consistently emerge as central motivators of women's engagement in sustainability. A consistent finding across the literature is that pro-environmental attitudes, empathy, and value-oriented thinking strongly predict sustainable behavior. For example, research on students shows that personal attitudes are the most powerful driver of environmental engagement, even outweighing external pressures such as institutional policies or peer influence (6). This underscores that sustainability often begins with deeply internalized beliefs about responsibility, justice, and care for others. Positive psychology further strengthens this argument by reframing sustainable behavior not as a burden or sacrifice but as a source of psychological benefit. Individuals who engage in sustainable practices often experience greater well-being, happiness, and a sense of purpose, making sustainability a self-reinforcing cycle of values and satisfaction (7).

This tendency is particularly relevant for women entrepreneurs, who are often socialized to prioritize empathy, cooperation, and relational leadership. These psychological traits influence not only everyday behaviors, such as conserving resources or purchasing eco-friendly products, but also long-term strategic business decisions. Evidence from organizational contexts demonstrates that women in leadership roles bring stakeholder-oriented perspectives and are more likely to view sustainability as integral to corporate identity rather than a peripheral goal (8). This suggests that the psychological orientations of empathy and risk aversion translate directly into environmental policy outcomes at the organizational level. Importantly, the benefits of these motivations are not limited to the individual; they ripple outward by shaping consumer trust, employee engagement, and organizational reputation (8).

However, psychological motivations do not operate in isolation. They intersect with cultural and social expectations that portray women as natural caretakers, reinforcing the perception that they are responsible for protecting the environment (9). While this can encourage women to embrace sustainability, it also creates the risk of overburdening them with environmental responsibility in ways that men may resist.

This tension reveals a central contradiction within the eco-gender gap: the same psychological traits that empower women to lead in sustainability are also used to justify placing disproportionate responsibility on them. Empathy and long-term thinking, when framed as "natural" female traits, shift sustainability from a shared ethical choice into an expected obligation. As a result,

women's leadership may be praised symbolically while remaining unsupported structurally, reinforcing unequal labor rather than reducing it.

Still, psychological evidence points to a clear pattern: women's values, empathy, and sense of purpose make sustainability not only an ethical priority but also a meaningful expression of identity and leadership. The challenge, therefore, is not women's motivation itself, but how these motivations are socially interpreted and institutionally rewarded. By framing sustainability through these psychological lenses, we can better understand why female entrepreneurs often integrate environmental concerns at the core of their business models—and why this integration must be supported rather than taken for granted.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON GENDERED APPROACHES TO SUSTAINABILITY

Social and cultural expectations strongly shape how sustainability is understood, marketed, and practiced, often along gendered lines. A recurring theme in the literature is the feminization of sustainability, where sustainability is culturally coded as feminine, according to Johansen (2021) in her YouTube lecture on sustainability and gender. This framing not only encourages women to adopt environmentally responsible practices but also reinforces the perception that environmentalism is part of women's "natural" role. Table 1 highlights how social norms and the feminization of sustainability shape expectations around environmental responsibility, reinforcing women's participation while discouraging broader gender engagement. For example, research on gender and sustainable consumption demonstrates that women are more likely to take on private, everyday sustainable behaviors, such as conserving water or buying eco-friendly household goods, because society expects them to manage both family well-being and environmental care simultaneously (9). Men, by contrast, often avoid behaviors coded as feminine, such as using reusable bags or recycling, even when they recognize the environmental benefits. This pattern illustrates how cultural norms can create an eco-gender gap by positioning sustainability as women's work while limiting men's participation.

The influence of gender norms is also evident in entrepreneurship, where women frequently draw inspiration from role models and feminist networks that encourage sustainability as part of their business

identity. A study of sustainable entrepreneurs in the United Kingdom found that women often relied on social and professional networks to launch and grow their businesses, demonstrating how cultural support structures can shape women's engagement in sustainability (10). At the same time, these networks reflect broader cultural narratives that celebrate women as agents of environmental responsibility, reinforcing a cycle where women are both encouraged and expected to lead. Goebel (2003) critiques this dynamic by warning against treating women as inherently "closer to nature," arguing that such assumptions simplify complex social realities and risk placing undue responsibility on women while minimizing men's role in environmental change.

Together, these findings highlight the double-edged nature of social and cultural influences. On one hand, the feminization of sustainability empowers women as visible leaders in environmental innovation, providing both symbolic and practical platforms for change. On the other hand, it risks reinforcing stereotypes that overburden women and excuse men from environmental responsibility.

This contradiction matters because cultural narratives do not simply reflect behavior; they actively shape who is expected to act. Addressing these cultural dynamics requires reframing sustainability as a universal obligation, one that includes but does not rely exclusively on women's participation. Without this reframing, efforts to celebrate women's leadership may unintentionally reinforce the very inequalities they seek to challenge. Only by shifting these social narratives can sustainability move from a gendered expectation to a shared societal norm.

ECONOMIC FACTORS SHAPING FEMALE-LED SUSTAINABLE ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Economic factors play a powerful role in shaping the ways female entrepreneurs approach sustainability, often reinforcing both opportunities and constraints. As shown in Table 1, market incentives and leadership outcomes tend to reward women-led sustainability initiatives, while persistent funding barriers restrict their capacity to grow. One key influence comes from consumer behavior. Studies show that customers are increasingly willing to support businesses that demonstrate strong environmental and social responsibility, even tolerating higher prices for sustainable goods and services (11). For women-led ventures, this consumer demand creates a competitive advantage, as sustainability is often central to their brand identity. However, the same studies also

demonstrate that when companies neglect environmental responsibility, consumer backlash can be particularly severe, suggesting that sustainability is not just a market differentiator but an economic necessity in modern business.

At the leadership level, women entrepreneurs and executives often translate these consumer and market signals into concrete organizational policies. Evidence indicates that companies with female CEOs are more likely to adopt sustainable environmental strategies, particularly when supported by gender-diverse boards (8). This suggests that women's leadership not only aligns with market preferences but also has measurable effects on corporate structures and long-term strategy. Yet, despite these positive outcomes, women face systemic economic barriers, including unequal access to venture capital, reluctance to take on high levels of debt, and limited institutional support for scaling sustainable initiatives. For example, in 2024, companies founded solely by women received just 2.3% of global venture capital funding, while all-male founding teams got over 80%, illustrating the funding disparity that women face even when their businesses perform well (12). These challenges restrict women's ability to fully capitalize on the economic potential of sustainable entrepreneurship.

Economic inequities are further compounded at the global level, where women in developing regions, particularly rural women in arid and semi-arid areas of South Asia and India, experience heightened vulnerability to climate change due to poverty, gender inequality, insecure land rights, and limited access to education and institutional support (14). Recent literature shows that climate change not only threatens women's livelihoods but also increases their workload, physical risk, and social marginalization, especially in agriculture-dependent communities where women are responsible for securing water, fuel, and food (14).

At the same time, this research complicates the narrative of women as solely passive victims of climate change. Studies indicate that women often act as proactive agents of adaptation, drawing on local knowledge and experience to reduce environmental risk, adopt climate-resilient strategies, and support community-level mitigation efforts (13). However, this dual framing of women as both highly vulnerable and key agents of change can unintentionally reinforce unequal responsibility when adaptation work is emphasized without parallel access to resources or decision-making power.

The literature further highlights that women's

exclusion from governance and formal climate decision-making limits their access to climate finance and adaptation programs, even as they are expected to implement solutions at the household and community levels (14). As a result, global climate responses may rely heavily on women's labor and resilience while failing to address the structural conditions, such as limited asset ownership and political representation, that shape vulnerability in the first place. This pattern mirrors the broader eco-gender gap identified throughout this review: women's environmental leadership is recognized in theory but not in practice.

Taken together, these findings reveal that economic dynamics both empower and constrain women in sustainable entrepreneurship. Consumer demand and leadership effectiveness reward sustainability-focused strategies, but barriers in funding, institutional support, and global equity prevent women from realizing their full potential as change agents.

Complicated rules and limited support make it harder for women to launch and expand sustainable ventures (10). This economic contradiction highlights a structural imbalance: women-led ventures but are denied the financial tools needed to scale it. Sustainability becomes a competitive expectation rather than a supported innovation, placing women in a position where they must outperform within systems that remain uneven. As a result, women's success in sustainability is often framed as individual resilience rather than evidence of systemic failure in access to capital and institutional backing.

Addressing these economic challenges is therefore critical to ensuring that sustainability is not the responsibility of women alone but an opportunity accessible to all entrepreneurs.

CONCLUSION

The eco-gender gap in entrepreneurship is not the result of a single factor but rather the outcome of interconnected psychological, social, and economic dynamics. At the same time, cultural norms have feminized sustainability, encouraging women to adopt it as part of their roles while implicitly excusing men from participation. These expectations empower women to be visible leaders in sustainability but also place an unequal burden on them. Finally, economic forces create both opportunities and constraints: consumer demand rewards sustainability, and women in leadership often succeed in translating this into organizational change, but systemic inequities in funding and global resource distribution restrict the full realization of their potential.

As shown in Table 1, the eco-gender gap reflects a recurring pattern across domains: women are encouraged to lead sustainability efforts, but structural and cultural systems often fail to distribute responsibility or support equitably. Taken together, these patterns suggest that the eco-gender gap is sustained not simply by individual choice, but by broader systems that reward women's environmental leadership without fully supporting it. As a narrative review, this paper emphasizes conceptual synthesis rather than empirical generalization, highlighting how psychological motivation, social expectations, and economic structures reinforce one another to both enable and constrain women's roles in sustainability. Across these domains, women's leadership is simultaneously encouraged and limited by the same forces that position sustainability as their responsibility.

This review also has important limitations. Because it synthesizes existing literature rather than presenting original empirical data, it cannot measure causal relationships or fully capture variation across regions, industries, or cultural contexts. Much of the available research focuses on women's behavior, leaving men's roles in sustainability underexamined and often treated as the implicit norm rather than an active area of inquiry.

Future research should address these gaps by conducting comparative studies that examine how men engage with sustainability, how masculinity norms influence environmental behavior, and how mixed-gender leadership teams distribute responsibility for sustainable practices. In addition, policy-focused research is needed to evaluate interventions, such as equitable access to climate finance, gender-inclusive entrepreneurship programs, and institutional accountability measures, that could rebalance sustainability leadership across genders.

By recognizing both the opportunities and the burdens embedded in the eco-gender gap, this paper argues that true progress depends on shifting sustainability from a gendered expectation to a shared responsibility. Women are leading the way in sustainable entrepreneurship, but they face unequal burdens shaped by social expectations, funding gaps, and a lack of support. A more inclusive approach, which is one that supports women while actively engaging men and institutions, is essential for achieving long-term environmental and social progress.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest related to this work.

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