

Research Paper



## Environmental restoration through women led community engagement: reflections from the woman leader of siruthuli

Dr. D. Divya Prabha<sup>1\*</sup>, M. R. Safrin<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Management Sciences, PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

<sup>2</sup>Research Assistant, PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

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### ABSTRACT

At the National and International level, women have increasingly become transformative forces in enabling social and environmental change. Their inherent ability to adopt inclusive, participatory approach in addressing societal challenges has implicitly contributed to the sustainable growth of the community. This qualitative case study explores the leadership journey of Ms. Vanitha Mohan, Managing Trustee of Siruthuli a NGO established with a mission of protecting and restoring Coimbatore's ecological system. The study examines how the collaborative leadership style of the Woman leader has inspired the different stakeholders of the society to engage proactively in environmental restoration and sustainable water management, with particular emphasis on the rejuvenation of the Noyyal River basin. Insights gathered from an interview with her highlight the role of her early life influences, personal motivation, key initiatives, and community mobilisation strategies in uniting diverse stakeholders to restore the region's ecological balance. The findings demonstrate that women-led environmental leadership strengthens ecological resilience by promoting social cohesion and a sense of collective responsibility, offering a replicable framework for sustainable development.

#### Keywords:

Siruthuli

Women Leader

Noyyal River System

Environmental Restoration

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#### Corresponding Author:

Dr. D. Divya Prabha

Associate Professor, Department of Management Sciences, PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

Email: [divyaprabha@psgcas.ac.in](mailto:divyaprabha@psgcas.ac.in)

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Being a serious global problem, environmental degradation is a serious concern which many environmental movements and activists are taking action to reduce its impact by executing various inclusive strategies. Considering the Manchester of South India, Coimbatore was a city that was having copious water resources and a pleasant climate in the yester years. However with unplanned urbanisation and unprecedented industrial growth, the city faced 6 monsoonal failures and severe drought in the years 2000-2003 [1] affecting agricultural production, depleting groundwater levels, and people stressed to get cleaner water. With unchecked urbanisation, industrialisation, silt accumulation and illegal encroachments, the River Noyyal, which is the main water source of Coimbatore, suffered a severe degradation. In this critical moment, a group of eco-committed industrialists joined together with a common goal to revive and restore the river Noyyal system and the ecosystem of Coimbatore. Thus, in the year 2003, the NGO Siruthuli which means 'a small drop' was established [2]. With the support of the trustees from the industry and guided by the steering committee experts, Siruthuli is progressing under the able guidance of Ms. Vanitha Mohan- the Managing trustee of the NGO since 2003 [3]. By embracing an integrative approach of including community members from different segments of the society, she spearheads the NGO Siruthuli, with the mission of making Coimbatore a greener region by involving the citizens of Coimbatore by making them more socially sensitive.

With a foresight to preserve the local water resources and revitalize the Noyyal River system the task of Siruthuli started with the restoration of the water bodies that were replenished by the Noyyal River. Apart from water management, Siruthuli extended its focus to a holistic, integrated approach in order to restore the region's ecological balance, by focussing on increasing the forest cover, solid and liquid waste management, creating environmental awareness, and promoting sustainable agriculture by empowering the farmers [4]. Over two decades, the NGO Siruthuli has scaled up into a reputed environmental institution, with the able guidance and strategic leadership of the women leader Ms. Vanitha Mohan, who is spearheading as Managing Trustee of the organisation. By adopting an integrative and all-inclusive approach, she has established Siruthuli, as a movement meant for common people based on the ideals of inclusivity, and collective responsibility and action to enhance the ecosystem of Coimbatore for current and future generations.

## 2. RELATED WORK

The women leaders involved in sustainable development encountered structural and internal challenges which includes male-dominance and less confidence [5]. Women leaders contribute to the sustainable development of Colombian fishing communities by connecting education, service and people networks [6]. The study of 24 female managers in the logistics sectors of Spain exhibits the sustainable and unsustainable leadership traits as "bee-like" and "locust-like" emphasizing the restricted knowledge sharing and tenacious gender gaps [7]. insist on balancing between the gender gaps in professional and domestic roles which limits the women leadership in the private sector of Zimbabwe due to socio-cultural patriarchy [8]. Eventhough women associations support gender equality, women are not included in the management or leadership positions in tourism Industry [9], continuous exclusion, harassment and salary inequalities are faced by women leaders of US conservation which highlights the persistent gender related challenges exhibited with the interviews given by 56 women leaders of the respective conservation [10]. 17 female and 15 male chairpersons from different institutions were analysed and concluded that water leadership in northern Namibia is gender balanced and female leaders were highly educated and younger compared to males, yet with traditional leadership qualities [11]. Comparing leaders based on gender found that female leaders effectively use social connections while serving the community to initiate change, and knowledge gains [12]. Strong women-nature bond, the commitment to care the environment, empowerment and the power of challenging the obstacle was seen in women participants of green NGO's in South Australia [13]. Women in Marsabit and Kenya revealed strong leadership in informal management of water by effective conflict management and ensures access of the resources despite excluding them from

formal water committee due to socio-cultural allegations [14]. Women in Ghana's Wa West district passionately involve in decision making rather than mere participation in rural water infrastructure which was disclosed by 37 community leaders [15]. According to, despite women facing caste-based and gender based barriers in rural parts of Rajasthan, they involve actively in reforming climate change [16]. Although facing intrinsic obstacles such as male supremacy, less decision making power, educational limitedness to women leaders in Punjab, Pakistan they have eagerly participated in tree planting, climate awareness and water management [17]. Ecological awareness is created by women leaders who play a major role in forest conservation even when there is a lack of accountable stakeholders [18]. Women with core leadership qualities such as persistence, mentorship, communication skills and a clear vision leads to public change through strategical leadership [19]. Despite the women leaders facing complications of balancing the responsibilities between intrinsic women and the extrinsic leader, often they choose a participatory bottom-up leadership style with the desire to serve for the development of the community [20]. Despite of structural and social obstacles, black women leaders progress well in the domains of service leadership [21] whereas Indian women NGO leaders in post-liberal India are empowered through both networking and community engagement, inspite of facing gender biases and patriarchal norms [22].

Although the foreseen reviews emphasized on the governance of women leaders in the domain of sustainable development, majority of the research focused on surveys to understand the perspectives of multiple participants rather than understanding the live experience of women leaders indicating the need to undertake studies which aims to understand the personal experiences of female leaders to gain a holistic picture of their experiences in eco- restoration projects, that is examined in this case study.

### **Study Objectives**

- A. To comprehend the impact of early life, inspirations, prominent projects, and community involvement strategies followed by the women leader.
- B. To understand the consequences of the Siruthuli's environmental restoration projects.
- C. To present women leader's expectations from the society to enhance the ecological sustainability for a better future.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

The gain a comprehensive understanding of the leadership style and her experiences of the woman leader, this case study employs a qualitative study approach. As personal experiences can be well understood by adopting a qualitative approach [23], this study employed a semi structured interview method to understand the multifaceted socio-cultural aspects confronted by the leader, while engaging in the task of environmental revitalisation.

Through review of literature, the key themes of questioning were identified. The secondary data about the outcomes of Siruthuli's initiatives was collected from the reports of Siruthuli and the articles published about the NGO in the media. The collected data was analysed by using thematic analysis and to ensure the reliability the data was triangulated using the secondary data sources.

### **3.1. Themes Observed for the Study**

The Early life and family Impact with specific focus of parental influence on leadership was analysed by Hartman & Harris (1992) [24], the influence of family dynamics on leadership Maharajh, Dhliwayo & Chebo (2024) [25]. The Socio- environmental drivers influencing the inception and performance of the NGO was studies by Moghimi, (2007) [26], and Hedjazi & Arabi, (2009) [27]. The learning from the Project experiences and its impact on scaling up the projects was documented by Terron-Lopez & Blanco-Archipa (2017) [28], Edwards & Hulme (1992) [29].The holistic development strategies was studied by Lawrence, Lawrence & Lawrence (2023) [30]. The community engagement strategies and the opportunities derived from it was highlighted by Head (2007) [31] and Radford (2015) [32]. Aspirations of the leaders to improve the ecological sustainability was presented by Jagersma (2007) [33] and Wilson (2024) [34].

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

- **Theme 1: Early Life and Family Impact**

The early life experiences and family influence play a significant role in shaping an individual's behaviour. The respondent shared her personal experience as the Noyyal River was introduced to her by her grandmother. During her childhood days, there was more water in the Noyyal River throughout the year. At that period, almost all the ponds had water and were fully surrounded by trees. She thought that it would continue like that forever, but there was an imminent change occurring in the landscape, and the pond Valankulam was destroyed by the effluents and other illegal encroachments. She was quite disturbed by the gradual depletion of the landscape and felt an immediate need to revive the landscape, which she enjoyed during her childhood. Regarding her family, both her parents were environmental activists and were interested in Environmental Conservation, particularly her mother was focused on growing trees and her father was one of the pioneers in introducing drip irrigation to India. He is a researcher and he often discussed its components and insisted on water conservation. He will refer to Israel about their effective management water resources. After her marriage, her husband was also an environmental activist. Pursuing her passion was made easy with the whole-hearted support of her family members and she also insist that women can do wonders with the imminent support of their families in following their passion.

- **Theme 2: Social and Ecological Factors that Influenced the Inception of Siruthuli**

Rising economic/community crises having an immediate impact on an individual or society creates an imminent drive urging individuals to take action for recovery. Ms. Vanitha Mohan explains that the situation became worse since the Coimbatore district had 6 monsoon failures between 2002 and 2003. The continuous failure of the monsoon for three long years led to a decrease in the groundwater level. The NGO "Siruthuli" (meaning "a small drop"), was started in 2003 by a group of ecologically and socially conscious industrialists from Coimbatore which was imminent during that period to fix the emerging problem and restoring the region to its original ecological state. They began researching about the Noyyal River, which was the Lifeline of Coimbatore, and analysed the landscape of the Western Ghats nearby. They found out there were 21 anicut and 32 ponds constructed by our ancestors in the Noyyal Basin in the past, yet they were not maintained and disappeared as years passed. They felt the importance of restoring the ecosystem for our future generation, for them to enjoy and live with the natural resources that we are enjoying currently – clean air and good water.

- **Naming the NGO as Siruthuli**

A thoughtfully chosen name with meaning will establish itself as a powerful brand that will be easily recognised and remembered by the stakeholder groups. The respondent explained the reason behind naming the NGO as Siruthuli, as the small droplet of water serves as the base for larger water bodies. They started an NGO named 'Siruthuli', referring small drop. They believed that by starting as a small organization, they would also expand into a big institution with the collaborative stakeholders' support.

- **Theme 3: Prominent Experiences in Projects Executed**

Exposures gained with project execution help to understand the ground realities and practical issues in implementation. The narrator, Ms. Vanitha Mohan, shared the prominent project occurrences that made Siruthuli gain the public trust. Reviving the Krishnampathy Pond situated in the Western parts of Coimbatore was the first project of Siruthuli. When we started the project the farmers who were living nearby advised not to waste our time in cleaning the pond, as they had not seen water for the past decade. But we took it as a challenge of reviving it. So we approached the Water man of India, Rajendra Singh, who revived the dead river Arvari of Rajasthan. His consultation confirmed that the direction of the progress was right and surely, we will see result by having the Western Ghats in the vicinity. After cleaning, within three days, there were rains and the Krishnampathy pond, with a depth of 17 feet and a coverage of about 75 acres, was fully filled with water. Within a few months, all the dried wells in nearby places started having underground water, creating an unshaken trust among the farmers.

The Nandangarai project is one of the initial projects undertaken, to support the local farmers. Based on the request of the local farmers, Siruthuli along with the support of the District Rural Development Authority built the check dam. As the check dam water storage capacity is 200 million liters, this project has benefitted more than 600 farming families, fertilising more than 1600 hectares of land.

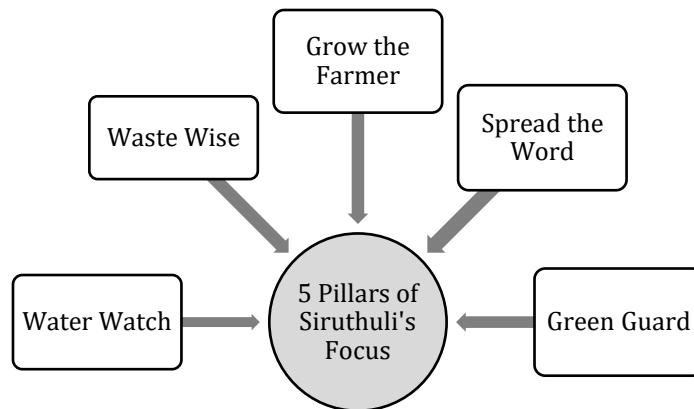
With holistic support from the public, the project at Periyakulam is another notable initiative. When the project started, Siruthuli expected 200 volunteers to join them. With ardent interest 2000 Volunteers turned up. Being a big pond of 320 acres, the cleaning happened every week end. By seeing the excellent teamwork, at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday there were more than 10,000 motivated volunteers who were working enthusiastically for the project. The team work was rewarded by mother nature- even though it was not a monsoon season, there was rains and the whole lake was fully filled with water. As depicted in [Table 1](#), apart from the notable projects, Siruthuli has restored 70+ waterbodies creating an additional volume of more than 21 million litres”.

[Table 1](#). Water Conservation Milestones Achieved

Sr. No	Type of Water Body	Quantity (Nos)	Area (Acres)	Additional Volume Created (Million Liters)
1	Streams & Check Dams	19	44	307
2	Ponds	37	212	1043
3	Lakes	21	1737	8107
4	Urban rain water harvesting systems	939	470	12347
	Total	1024	2473	21870

- **Theme 4: Strategies for Holistic Development**

The holistic growth of the environment can be fruitful considering and including the different elements of sustainability. The respondent detailed this as “With a need for holistic development, apart from water conservation which is focused in the First pillar water watch, Siruthuli also concentrates on 4 other pillars namely - Waste wise, Green guard, Grow the farmer and Spread the word for enabling a synergistic sustainable growth as showed in [Figure 1](#).



[Figure 1](#). Five Pillars of Siruthuli's Focus

#### A. Pillar 2: Green Guard

The respondent presented the importance of improving the green cover and detailed about the pillar green cover. She informed that the pillar focussed on planting one tree for every one citizen in Coimbatore. With 1.5 million being the population of Coimbatore, Siruthuli has set a target of planting 1.5 million trees and so far, it has planted above 9 lakh trees in different locations. The achievements done by the NGO in this pillar is presented in [Table 2](#).

**Table 2.** Afforestation Milestones Achieved

Sr. No	Type of Plantation	Project (Nos)	Area (Acres)	Total Trees (Nos)
1	Thematic	17	20	39713
2	Public spaces	98	393	606593
3	Private spaces	56	28	55765
4	Big plantations	5	103	206500
	Total	176	454	908571

#### **B. Pillar 3: Waste Wise**

As a cleaner city ensures better air quality improving standard of life of the citizens, the respondent explained about the activities of the NGO under the pillar Waste Wise. By conducting more than 200 cleaning drives the NGO has ensured regular cleaning of solid and liquid waste in the water bodies. Apart from this 100+ awareness programs on sustainable waste management, is also conducted with specific focus on home composting. By conducting workshops, the members are enabled to compost their kitchen waste into useful organic manure. With extensive participation, this training has empowered 4 lakh+ public beneficiaries.

#### **C. Pillar 4: Spread the Word**

As a knowledgeable society is important to protect the planet, Siruthuli's next pillar of focus is spread the word. The respondent detailed the programs, campaigns and outreach activities ensure awareness is spread among the public. As the youth are the future of the country, the NGO mainly targets to empower the school and college students with varied activities. The program "Sittukaludam Siruthuli" focuses on school children, where they come to the office of Siruthuli and they are given hands on sessions on leading a sustainable life. The program "Mottukaludam Siruthuli" focuses on college students. Siruthuli organizes regular visits to colleges in and around Coimbatore and conducts awareness talks on the importance and ways of being ecofriendly. More than 200 programs have been organized benefitting more than 2 lakh general public and with regards to youth, more than 70000 students from 300 + educational institutions were sensitized on sustainable living.

#### **D. Pillar 5: Grow the Farmer**

To enhance sustainable agriculture, the pillar "Grow the Farmer" aims to support the farmers by collaborating with farmer associations to share the expertise on sourcing of agricultural inputs, strategic crop planning, improving storage facilities, organic and Zero budget farming. Simply put, grow the Farmer focuses on empowering the farmers to achieve productivity, sustainability, and economic stability.

#### **• Theme 5: Community Engagement Strategies**

Engagement the stakeholders being an important part of the success of any community development initiative, the respondent detailed about the community engagement strategies. Siruthuli engages the stakeholders in multiple ways. As an individual societal member, he/she can contribute by participating in the social projects done by the NGO. They can also serve as an evangelist and can share the success stories of the projects done. Apart from physical contribution, the members can also contribute in kind in the form of resources or technology. In case of public having vacant land, they can contact Siruthuli to set up rain water harvesting structures or Miyawaki forests. Along with the general public, corporates can also collaborate with the NGO as sponsors and supporters in various societal development projects. Siruthuli works in close cooperation with the Government departments in scaling up the projects. The different ways of the NGO collaboration is presented in [Figure 2](#).

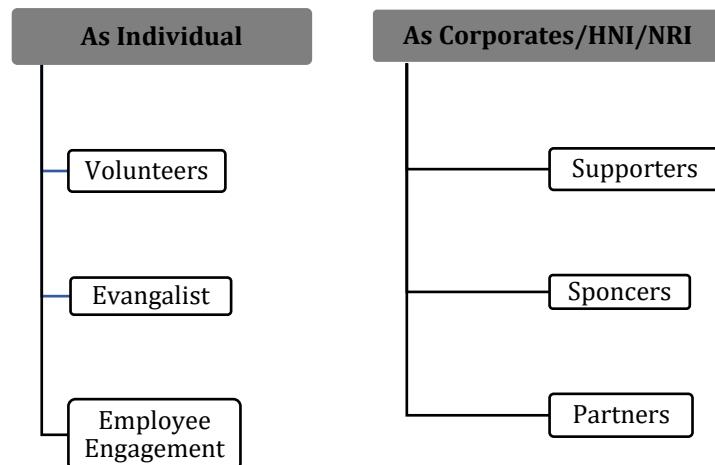


Figure 2. Multiple Ways of Collaborating with Siruthuli for Environmental Conservation

- **Outcomes of Siruthuli's Initiatives**

From the data collected through the reports of Siruthuli, the following Table 3 presents the achievements of the environmental restoration tasks of Siruthuli.

Table 3. Outcomes of the Environmental Initiatives of Siruthuli

Sr. No	Domain of Engagement	Milestones Achieved
1	Water Resource Management	21,000+ Million Litres Of New Water Storage 910 Rain Water Harvesting Structures 71 Water Bodies Rejuvenated 2300 +Acres In Water Bodies Restored
2	Green Cover	9 Lakh Tree Saplings Planted 70 Miyawaki Urban Forests Developed 14 Green Lung Spaces Created
3	Inclusive Development	650 + Events Conducted 4 Lakh + Participants In Various Programs 30 Lakh + Citizens Benefitted 15 Lakh + Students Inspired 1 Lakh + Volunteers Involved

- **Theme 6: Aspirations/Expectations for a Sustainable Future**

With more than two decades of practical experience in the domain of sustainable development by involving the different stakeholders of the society, the leader presented her expectations from the public that will enable a greener future that is summarised in Figure 3.

- Educating and empowering the youth towards sustainable living is very crucial for a bright future and therefore incorporating environmental education in the curriculum is a must.
- With rampant climatic changes, and declining ground water levels, public should give due importance to harvesting rainwater and must have a provision for saving it in their homes.
- With unseasonal rainfalls, there must be check on drilling borewells, to ensure soil health as well as reducing the chance of earth quakes.
- Increasing population have also increased the sewage and garbage. However, it can be reused prudentially by recycling it with the latest technologies available.
- Even though the Government and the NGO's work towards a cleaner earth, it is a mammoth task requiring the support of every individual. Self-discipline is the key for a cleaner society, and every member in the society should follow the mantra of reduce, recycle and reuse.

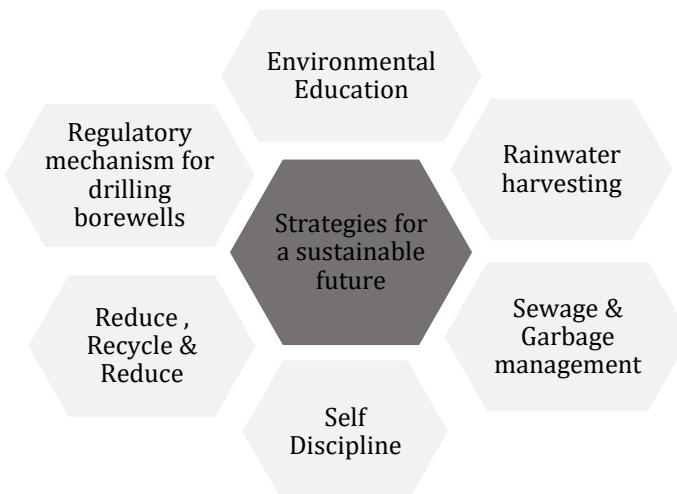


Figure 3. Expectations/Strategies for a Sustainable Future

## Results

This qualitative case study reveals that woman leadership, with well-defined personal values that are strengthened by society-centred ideals, will initiate purposeful environmental transition. By understanding the personal narratives of the woman leader, involved in environmental restoration, this case study demonstrates the influence of an individual's early life experiences, and ecological consciousness can contribute to reviving and restoring the ecological balance of a region by following an inclusive approach of mobilising diverse groups of stakeholders (Farmers, youth, volunteers, corporates, and policymakers) to create a model for sustainable water resource management and environmental restoration. The findings also present the approach of Siruthuli in focussing on the different elements of holistic growth afforestation, waste management, raising awareness and empowering farmers, which has not only created tangible and intangible environmental gains, but has also enhanced the involvement of the community in environmental governance contributing to the all-inclusive progress of the region. Thus this case study offer is a transferable plan for cities in quest of building eco-friendly cities through inclusive and society-anchored environmental stewardship.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The research paper on the leadership journey of Mdm Vanitha Mohan and the transformational work of the NGO Siruthuli demonstrates, how community-centred environmental action can redefine the dynamics of community engagement. The approach of the Women leader exemplifies that effective ecological restoration is not merely a procedural endeavour, but a collective social progression built on trust, inclusiveness, and shared responsibility. By mobilising citizens, corporates, educational institutions, and governmental bodies, Siruthuli has demonstrated that empowered communities can become powerful agents of environmental change. Most importantly, the case highlights how women's leadership brings empathy, participatory decision-making, and long-term vision to environmental governance. As environmental challenges intensify, the Siruthuli model reaffirms that resilient ecosystems emerge when communities are inspired, informed, and united under visionary leadership.

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### Author Contributions Statement

Name of Author	C	M		So	Va	Fo	I	R	D	O	E	Vi	Su	P	Fu
Dr. D. Divya Prabha	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
M. R. Safrin					✓			✓	✓		✓			✓	

C : Conceptualization  
 M : Methodology  
 So : Software  
 Va : Validation  
 Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation  
 R : Resources  
 D : Data Curation  
 O : Writing - Original Draft  
 E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization  
 Su : Supervision  
 P : Project administration  
 Fu : Funding acquisition

### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors affirm that there is no conflicting interest associated with this research, its results, or its publication in any form.

### Informed Consent

Informed consent was got from the participant and we, authors give consent to publish the data, images and the research paper.

### Ethical Approval

We assure that this article does not have any plagiarism or AI generated content.

### Data Availability

The datasets generated and presented in the present study is available as a file depository with the authors.

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## BIOGRAPHIES OF AUTHORS

	<p><b>Dr. D. Divya Prabha</b> , is an Associate professor at PSG College of Arts &amp; Science, associated with the Department of Management Sciences. With research focus in the domains of sustainable development, agricultural development and community-based sustainability initiatives, she continues to explore issues at the intersection of community engagement and environmental stewardship. She has an extensive experience in both teaching and research for over a decade, and has published research papers in Scopus, UGC and peer reviewed journals and also has made presentations in 30+ National and International conferences. Email: <a href="mailto:divyaprabha@psgcas.ac.in">divyaprabha@psgcas.ac.in</a></p>
	<p><b>M. R. Safrin</b> , is a Research assistant at PSG College of Arts &amp; Science, Her research domain include Work-life balance, Organisational management, Emotional intelligence and Eco-conscious conservation. As a psychology graduate, she focuses primarily on human behaviour and its impact on environmental development, and has presented research papers in several academic conferences. Email: <a href="mailto:safrinmr2002@gmail.com">safrinmr2002@gmail.com</a></p>