

“Voices Rooted in Earth: Women’s Role in Heritage-Led Sustainability”

It is a privilege to be part of this round table. I extend heartfelt congratulations to the entire team for the successful completion of the project—one that I hope will serve as a model for similar initiatives in the future.

This gathering offers a thoughtful and inspiring way to bring closure: by opening dialogue across geographies, disciplines, and lived experiences. My sincere thanks to the organizers for convening such a vital conversation on heritage and sustainability in these times of climate change crisis.

While my engagement with the Green Heritage project has been modest, it has offered profound insights into the entangled relationships between ecology, ritual practice, and community memory.

As a scholar deeply invested in Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), I remain committed to safeguarding these living traditions—especially as they evolve within ecological, urban, and ritual landscapes shaped by both continuity and change.

At ICICH, we champion participatory stewardship, interdisciplinary documentation, and ethical frameworks that honour not only legacy but lived experience. Our work seeks to ensure that intangible heritage is not merely preserved, but meaningfully integrated into the futures that communities envision for themselves.

what I have understood all these years is that Intangible Cultural Heritage is a living archive of human adaptation.

It is Rooted in oral traditions, seasonal rituals, ecological memory, and performative practices, it carries centuries of wisdom—shaped by communities in response to their environments.

Yet today, climate change threatens not only ecosystems, but the very cultural rhythms and relationships that define community life. Ritual landscapes are disrupted, seasonal markers are blurred, and custodianship is fractured.

And still, ICH offers pathways forward. These traditions are not relics—they are resilient systems of knowledge.

They teach us how to live with the land, how to share water, how to read the sky.

They offer climate-responsive practices that are locally grounded, emotionally resonant, and socially inclusive.

To safeguard ICH is not only to protect heritage—it is to invest in climate justice, community agency, and sustainable futures.

I wish to centre a truth often overlooked in climate discourse: that women are not only disproportionately affected by environmental change—they are also among its most powerful agents of resilience.

The Agenda 2030 motto—“*Leave no one behind*”—demands more than inclusion.

It calls for transformation.

Gender equity is not a peripheral concern; it is foundational to climate justice. And intangible cultural heritage—rituals, oral traditions, ecological memory—is the terrain where this transformation begins.

If we turn to India as a case study, we encounter a tapestry of plural wisdoms—gendered knowledge systems that have long shaped climate-responsive practices across diverse ecological zones.

From the rain-invoking rituals of arid landscapes to the sacred groves of the Western Ghats, women have cultivated and transmitted adaptive traditions rooted in ecological memory and cultural ethics. These practices include:

- Water-sharing customs that foster collective responsibility
- Indigenous seed preservation and agro-ecological calendars aligned with seasonal rhythms
- Festivals and rituals that renew community bonds and mark ecological transitions

Such knowledge is carried through song, labour, and intergenerational care. Women are not peripheral to climate resilience—they are its foundation. Their heritage is not only cultural—it is strategic.

Let me now share a few contemporary examples that illustrate how this legacy continues to evolve and empower:

In Coastal Karnataka, Divya Hegde’s initiative, Baeru, equips rural women with climate-responsive employment, training in waste management, and micro-entrepreneurship. By using local arts and language, Baeru bridges the gap between global climate discourse and community realities—affirming that environmental justice and gender equity are inseparable.

In Dhirasar village, Rajasthan, women leaders like Ms Mani and Ms Rameshwari have pioneered dryland farming innovations. Their work includes cultivating drought-resistant crops, constructing rainwater-harvesting embankments, and growing fodder trees. These efforts challenge the notion that climate solutions are economically unviable for rural populations.

In Bhadrak, Odisha, women’s self-help groups have responded to rising groundwater salinity by developing potable water solutions and advocating for gender-sensitive sanitation infrastructure. Their collectives transform everyday struggle into strategic resilience.

And in West Bengal's Nahi community, women devised an intuitive aquaculture method—placing chicken coops over ponds so that droppings feed the fish. This practice, rooted in ecological attunement, has significantly boosted household income and reflects the ingenuity embedded in lived heritage.

These examples are not isolated—they are emblematic. They remind us that when women lead, climate action becomes not only more inclusive, but more effective. Their knowledge is not supplementary—it is essential.

Women's Environmental Legacy

Even in the past, women have been fighting this battle—not with weapons, but with wisdom, courage, and care. Their resistance has shaped India's environmental consciousness in ways that are both profound and enduring.

Let us begin with the **Bishnoi Struggle of 1730**, in Khejarli, Marwar. Amrita Devi, a woman of deep conviction, could not bear to witness the destruction of her village's sacred trees. She embraced them—literally—and inspired 363 others to do the same.

Guided by the teachings of Guru Jambaji, who forbade harm to trees and animals, the Bishnoi community sacrificed their lives to protect their ecological heritage. Their martyrdom compelled the king to intervene, halt the logging, and declare the region a protected zone—a legacy that survives to this day.

Centuries later, in the **1970s**, Himalayan women revived this spirit through the **Chipko Movement**. They hugged trees to prevent deforestation, not as an act of nostalgia, but as a declaration of ecological rights. Their protest reframed conservation—not as a technical exercise, but as a moral, cultural, and gendered imperative. These women were not merely protecting forests; they were defending the rhythms of life, the integrity of soil, and the sanctity of community.

These stories are not just historical—they are foundational. They remind us that women have always been at the forefront of environmental stewardship. Their legacy is not passive memory—it is active inheritance. And it continues to shape how we imagine resilience today.

Same may the stories from Europe and other places, I hope these have been taken into consideration by Green Heritage project

ICICH & Green Heritage: Stewardship in Action

As Secretary General of the International Scientific Committee on Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICICH), I see our role not only as a bridge—but as a listening post, a catalyst, and a convener. We work to translate local memory into global policy, ensuring that intangible cultural heritage is not sidelined in climate discourse, but centred—as a resource for resilience, justice, and renewal.

ICICH champions participatory documentation, ethical stewardship, and interdisciplinary research. We advocate for frameworks that honour lived experience, ritual knowledge, and

community agency—especially in vulnerable ecological and urban contexts where heritage is not just remembered, but lived.

In this spirit, **Green Heritage** emerges as a vital ally. It offers a grounded, imaginative model for integrating ICH into climate-responsive urban transformation. What makes Green Heritage distinctive is its commitment to co-creation. It does not impose solutions—it cultivates them. Through dialogue, design, and deep listening, it affirms that communities are not passive beneficiaries, but active stewards of their own futures.

Together, ICICH and Green Heritage can collaborate in ways that are both practical and visionary:

The **ICOMOS International Charter and Guidance on Sites with Intangible Cultural Heritage**, adopted in 2024, marks a significant milestone in this journey. Developed through years of interdisciplinary dialogue and global collaboration, the Charter affirms that intangible heritage—rituals, oral traditions, ecological knowledge—is inseparable from the sites and communities that sustain it.

It offers guidance on documentation, interpretation, and management that centres community custodianship, cultural continuity, and rights-based approaches. Crucially, it aligns with the 2003 UNESCO Convention and reinforces the importance of safeguarding intangible heritage within climate-sensitive and socially inclusive frameworks.

I see this Charter not as a static document, but as a living framework—one that enables us to co-create with initiatives like Green Heritage. Together, we ensure that women's voices, ecological memory, and ritual labour are not only preserved but also empowered to shape the futures we hope to inhabit.

And here, I offer a gentle invitation.

While the Green Heritage project has made remarkable strides in addressing the impact of climate change on intangible cultural heritage, there remains an opportunity to more explicitly foreground **gendered heritage** and the role of **women as custodians of ecological memory**.

As we move forward, I invite Green Heritage to consider how future phases might more intentionally integrate gender-sensitive frameworks, amplify women's voices, and document the intangible practices that sustain both community and climate resilience.

This is where ICICH stands ready to collaborate. Together, we can co-create methodologies, convene interdisciplinary dialogues, and build capacity for participatory documentation that centres women—not as beneficiaries, but as leaders.

Because when we honour women's heritage, we don't just preserve the past—we shape the future.

Let us listen to the women who remember the rain, who plant by the moon, and who carry the seasons in their songs. In honouring their heritage, we do more than preserve the past—we make space for futures rooted in care, continuity, and courage."

I'd be keen to hear how others have encountered gendered heritage in their own contexts—whether through policy, practice, or community engagement. How might we collectively deepen this lens as we imagine the next phase of Green Heritage?"