

Eco-feminism: Role of Women in Environmental Governance and Management

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Abstract

Nature does not need us to rule over it, but runs itself very well and better without humans. We are the parasites on the food chain of life, consuming more and more, and putting too little back to restore and maintain the life system that supports us. Women have unique value as well as role in environmental governance. In spite of the special demands, unique value and vital role women have in environmental governance, disempowerment of women in other social domain is duplicated into environmental governance too. Ecological feminism, or ecofeminism, is an interdisciplinary movement which represents the synthesis of the radical movement in ecology and feminism.. Ecofeminist theory questions or rejects previously held patriarchal paradigms and holds that the domination of women by men is intimately linked to the destruction of the environment. Since time immemorial women are traditionally involved in protecting and conserving their natural resources. As consumers and producers, caretakers of their families and educators, women play an important role in promoting sustainable development through their concern for the quality and sustainability of life for present and future generations. There are many elements that need to go into an eco-feminist ethic and culture for a just and sustainable planet We' cannot afford to underestimate or neglect the role of women in building a sustainable future for the coming generation.

- ❖ *Major social transformation are impossible without ferment among the women. **Karl Max***
- ❖ *Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable development. **Rio Declaration Principle 20***

Women have long been allied with nature, Earth is surmised to be feminine in nature it has often been metaphorically termed as '**Mother Earth**'. Historically, women have had a faint access power in the outside world, they had been excluded from developmental methods, or their roles were seen as secondary to the potential economic gains. Rather it can be said, women have been generally submissive, as has been nature. Anthropological studies have suggested that the identification of women with nature and males with culture is both ancient and pervasive.

The word 'ecology' emerges from the biological science of natural environmental systems. It examines how these natural communities function to sustain a healthy web of life and how they become disrupted, causing death to the plant and animal life. Human intervention is obviously one of the main cause of such disruption. Thus, ecology emerged as a combined socio-economic and biological study to examine how human use of nature is causing pollution of soil, air and water, and destruction of the natural systems of plants and animals, threatening the base of life on which the human community itself depends.

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On one facet ecology speaks for the earth while on the other surface the dream of infinite progress has been turned into a nightmare. The past few decades have witnessed an enormous interest in both the women's movement and the environmental movement. Present era is an era of a notable union of policy objectives between idea of sustainability, environmental conservation and the advancement of women.

Ecological feminism, or ecofeminism, is an interdisciplinary movement which represents the synthesis of the radical movement in ecology and feminism. It is a movement that calls for a new way of thinking about nature, politics, and spirituality. Ecofeminist theory questions or rejects previously held patriarchal paradigms and holds that the domination of women by men is intimately linked to the destruction of the environment.

THE CONCEPT OF ECOFEMINISM

The Oxford Dictionary has defined the word Ecofeminism, “ a philosophical and political theory and movement which combines ecological concerns with feminist ones, regarding both as resulting from male domination of society”. There is a quandary regarding the origin of the word “ecofeminism” . Some scholars consider Francois d'Eaubonne, a French feminist and author of **Le Feminisme ou la Mort (Feminism or Death)**, published in 1974 and translated into English in 1989, the originator. Others acknowledge Susan Griffin's **Women and Nature** or Mary Daly's **Gyn/Ecology: The MetaEthics of Radical Feminism**, both published in 1978, as laying significant groundwork for ecofeminism, even though neither woman used the term in those works.¹.

It is said that prior to the seventeenth century, nature was conceived on an organic model as a benevolent female and a nurturing mother; after the scientific revolution, nature was conceived on a mechanistic model as (mere) machine, inert, dead. On both models, nature was female. It has been said that the move from the organic to the mechanistic model permitted the justified exploitation of the (female) earth, by removing the sorts of barriers to such treatment that the metaphor of nature as alive previously prevented; the mechanistic worldview of modern science sanctioned the exploitation of nature, unrestrained commercial expansion, and socioeconomic conditions that perpetuated the subordination of women².

Ecofeminism represents the union of the radical ecology movement, or what has been called 'deep ecology', and feminism. Feminism is a complex movement with many layers. It can be defined only as a movement within the liberal democratic societies for the full inclusion of women in political rights and economic access to employment. It can be defined more radically in a socialist and liberation tradition as a transformation of the patriarchal socio-economic system, in which male domination of women is the foundation of all socio-economic hierarchies. Feminism can also be studied in terms of culture and consciousness, charting the symbolic, psychological and ethical connections of domination of women and male monopolization of resources and controlling power. This third aspect of feminist analysis connects closely with deep ecology.

1. *Eco-feminist action in the 21st century*; BERNADETTE L. WAGNER / March 4th 2008 / 2

2. *Carolyn Merchant; The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution; 1980*

Ecofeminism came into being in the early 1970s in the United States, when a number of women became disillusioned with the mainstream environmental movement and sought to create more awareness among feminists about environmental concerns. Feminists before this had seen it as important to deemphasize

the differences between men and women, but ecofeminists embarked on a study of particularly female ways of being and thinking about nature throughout history.

WOMAN-NATURE CONNECTION

There are manifold connections of women to that with nature. These alleged connections provide sometimes competing, sometimes mutually complementary or supportive analyses of the nature of the twin dominations of women and nature. One alleged connection between women and nature is historical. When historical data are used to generate theories concerning the sources of the dominations of women and nature, it is also causal. So pervasive is the historical-causal theme in ecofeminist writing that Ariel Salleh practically defines ecofeminism in terms of it: "Eco-feminism is a recent development in feminist thought which argues that the current global environmental crisis is a predictable outcome of patriarchal culture"³. Many authors have argued that, ultimately, historical and causal links between the dominations of women and nature are sited in conceptual structures of domination that construct women and nature in male-biased ways. The twin dominations of women and nature is the outcome of the oppressive and patriarchal conceptual frameworks. Another explanation locates a conceptual basis in sex-gender differences, particularly in differentiated personality formation or consciousness. The claim is that female bodily experiences (e.g., of reproduction and childbearing), not female biology *per se*, situate women differently with respect to nature than men.

These socio psychological factors provide a conceptual link insofar as they are embedded in different conceptualized structures and strategies i.e., different ways of knowing, coping strategies and ways of relating to nature for women and men. A goal of ecofeminism then, is to develop gender-sensitive language, theory, and practices that do not further the exploitative experiences and habits of dissociated, male-gender identified culture toward women and nature. One chore of ecofeminism is to expose and dismantle the conceptual structures of domination which have kept various "isms of domination," particularly the dominations of women and nature, in place. If ecofeminists who allege various conceptual woman-nature connections are correct, this will involve reconceiving those mainstay philosophical notions which rely on them e.g., notions of reason and rationality, knowledge, objectivity, ethics, and the knowing, moral self. Many ecofeminists have focused on uncovering empirical evidence linking women with environmental destruction. Various health and risk factors borne disproportionately by women, children and the poor caused by the presence of low-level radiation, pesticides, toxics, and other pollutants. Some connect rape and pornography with male-gender identified abuse of both women and nature. Appeal to such empirical data is intended both to document the very real, felt, lived "experiential" connections between the dominations of women and nature and to motivate the need for joining together feminist critical analysis and environmental concerns.

However, sometimes the empirical and experiential connections between women and nature are intended to reveal important cultural and spiritual ties to the earth honored and celebrated by (some)

3. Ariel Salleh (1988) 'Environment: Consciousness and Action', *Journal of Environmental Education*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 26-31.

women and indigenous people. This imply that some woman-nature connections are features of important symbol systems. Some ecofeminists have explored the symbolic association and devaluation of women and nature that appears in religion, theology, art, and literature. Documenting such connections and making them integral to the project of ecofeminism is often heralded as ecofeminism's most promising contribution to the creation of liberating, life-affirming, and postpatriarchal worldviews and earth-based spiritualities or theologies. Some ecofeminist theorists draw on literature, particularly "nature writing," to unpack the nature of the woman-nature linguistic symbolic connections⁴. Literary

criticism of the sort offered by Patrick Murphy claims that patriarchal conceptions of nature and women have justified "a two-pronged rape and domination of the earth and the women who live on it", often using this as background for developing an ecofeminist literary theory.⁵ Some theorists focus on language, particularly the symbolic connections between sexist and naturist language, i.e., language that inferiorizes women and nonhuman nature by naturalizing women and feminizing nature. For example, there are concerns about whether sex-gendered language used to describe "Mother Nature" is, in Ynestra King's words, "potentially liberating or simply a rationale for the continued subordination of women"⁶ (Y. King 1981). Women are often described in animal terms (e.g., as cows, foxes, chicks, serpents, bitches, beavers, old bats, pussycats, cats, bird-brains, hare-brains). Nature is often described in female and sexual terms: nature is raped, mastered, conquered, controlled, mined. Her "secrets" are "penetrated" and her "womb" is put into the services of the "man of science." "Virgin timber" is felled, cut down. "Fertile soil" is tilled and land that lies "fallow" is "barren," useless. The claim is that language that so feminizes nature and naturalizes women describes, reflects, and perpetuates the domination and inferiorization of both by failing to see the extent to which the twin dominations of women and nature (including animals) are, in fact, culturally (and not merely figuratively) analogous. The development of theory and practice in feminism and environmental philosophy that does not perpetuate such sexist-naturist language and the power over systems of domination they underpin is, therefore, a goal of eco feminism.

Women have vital role in conservation and management of sustainable eco-system. Since time immemorial women are traditionally involved in protecting and conserving their natural resources. If we talk of natural resource management from a global perspective, whom do we find in the forefront of the race for protection and preservation of the resources. The answer comes very naturally, it is the women. Women particularly those living in rural areas or mountain areas have special relationship with the environment. They are more close to the nature than men and this very close relationship makes them perfect managers of an eco-system. The life of mountain women is so much interwined with the environment that whole ecosystem revolves around her and she can't even think of her survival without it. For her forest is her mother's home as she is entirely dependent on the forest to meet her daily needs such as - water, fodder, fuels, minor forest produce etc. With their extraordinary skills and traditional knowledge women have proved how land, water, forest and other natural resources can be used and managed. They have their own devised system and ways to sustain and manage the resources which are the basis of survival for their families and communities.

4. Michael E. Zimmerman, J. Baird Callicott, George Sessions, Karen J. Warren, and John Clark (Eds.), ***Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology***. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1993, pp. 253-267.

5. *Ibid*

6. *Transitions, Environments, Translations: Feminisms in International Politics*; By Professor Cora Kaplan, Joan W. Scott, Debra Keates

Women are also critical in agriculture and food security efforts, if women had equal access to resources, such as land, training, technology, and credit, food production would increase. This extensive and intimate relationship with the land means that women, often exclusively, have extensive knowledge of traditional remedies and plants, indigenous farming practices and local methods of crop cultivation. Agriculture development policies and programmes should be inclusive of women to meet local needs. Investing in women's education furthers economic goals and improves the health and wellbeing of future generations. Educated women tend to marry later and have fewer children. Their own children, in turn, tend to have lower infant mortality rates, higher school enrollment, and suffer less from malnutrition. Specific goals to promote gender equality must be set, doing so will benefit women's families, communities and nations today, and the environment and global economies tomorrow.

Recognizing the important role women play as environmental stewards, food producers, business owners, health care providers, and mothers is the key to creating a prosperous and sustainable future for everyone⁷.

The World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002), the International Conference on Population and Development (1994), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), and the 2005 World Summit all acknowledged the pivotal and important role women play in sustainable development. However, democratic governments and institutions have yet to draft a policy that addresses the relation between the economy, the environment and their impact on society – and especially on women.⁸

As the UN Secretary-General's Report notes:

“The challenge of climate change is unlikely to be gender-neutral, as it increases the risk to the most vulnerable and less empowered social groups. In the formulation of global and national approaches, as well as in the strategic responses to specific sectors, gender awareness, substantive analysis and inclusive engagement will be necessary.”⁹

Poverty is recognized as multi-dimensional with a complex interactive relationship between its various dimensions. Studies have shown that women experience greater poverty, have heavier time burdens, lower rates of utilization of productive resources and lower literacy rates. Gender disparities exist with respect to access to, and control of, a range of assets including direct and productive assets such as land and credit lines, human capital assets including education and health, and social capital assets such as participation at various levels, legal rights and protection. Lack of start-up capital and resources for any kind of income generation enterprise and lack of labour in smaller households prevent women from escaping poverty. Through their management and use of natural resources, women provide sustenance to their families and communities.

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7. *The role of women in sustainable development* by Jill Sheffield and Danielle Nierenberg Sunday, June 24, 2012; <http://www.buenosairesherald.com/article/104405/the-role-of-women-in-sustainable-development>)
 8. *Building Sustainable Development*; Tuesday, 15 November 2011 / Daniel Adebawale Bello Tags: Civil Society, democracy, developing countries, Natural Resources, Sub-Saharan Africa Regions: Africa
 9. *Ibid*

As consumers and producers, caretakers of their families and educators, women play an important role in promoting sustainable development through their concern for the quality and sustainability of life for present and future generations. Women remain largely absent at all levels of policy formulation and decision-making in natural resource and environmental management, conservation, protection and rehabilitation, and their experience and skills in advocacy for and monitoring of proper natural resource management too often remain marginalized in policy-making and decision-making bodies, as well as in educational institutions and environment-related agencies at the managerial level.

Environmental governance refers to the rules, processes and behavior that affect the way power is exercised at all levels in the field of environmental policy. It also includes other areas that have an impact on the environment, and concepts such as openness in participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence. Women are rarely trained as professional natural resource managers with policy-making capacities, such as land-use planners, agriculturalists, foresters, marine scientists and environmental lawyers. Even in cases where women are trained as professional natural resource managers, they are

often underrepresented in formal institutions with policy-making capacities at the national, regional and international levels.¹⁰ Often women are not equal participants in the management of financial and corporate institutions whose decision-making most significantly affects environmental quality. Furthermore, there are institutional weaknesses in coordination between women's non-governmental organizations and national institutions dealing with environmental issues, despite the recent rapid growth and visibility of women's non-governmental organizations working on these issues at all levels.

Conclusion

The world of nature, plants and animals existed billions of years before we came on the scene. Nature does not need us to rule over it, but runs itself very well and better without humans. We are the parasites on the food chain of life, consuming more and more, and putting too little back to restore and maintain the life system that supports us. We need to recognize our utter dependence on the great life-producing matrix of the planet in order to learn to reintegrate our human systems of production, consumption and waste into the ecological patterns by which nature sustains life. This might begin by revisualizing the relation of mind or human intelligence to nature. As women have vital role in conservation and management of sustainable eco-system, since time immemorial women are traditionally involved in protecting and conserving their natural resources. With their extraordinary skills and traditional knowledge women have proved how land, water, forest and other natural resources can be used and managed. Historically and practically, man dominates woman. The needs and roles of man and woman in environmental governance are distinguishable. Women have unique value as well as role in environmental governance. In spite of the special demands, unique value and vital role women have in environmental governance, disempowerment of women in other social domain is duplicated into environmental governance, faced with expanded masculinization of contemporary environmental governance, it's time for us to realize that women is forced to be 'absent' from the aforesaid, they are considered as outside forces. Women are confronted with more obstruction when using the deliberative pipelines due to their disadvantages in the society.

10. **Plant Judith, Women and Nature**, extract taken from 'Green Line' magazine (Oxford). Not dated, but late 1980's. It was reprinted in *The Green Reader*.

The first step to make women full participants in adaptation lies in recognizing their value in environmental and climate negotiations and in supporting advocacy group work. The next is finding concrete ways to integrate women into the planning, development, and execution of climate adaptation strategies for a sustainable future. Socio-cultural factors continue to hinder gender equality in terms of access to, and use of, services and also contribute to situations such as inequitable allocation of food within the household which leads to malnutrition notably among women and children. Gender- based violence also has important health, economical, political and environmental implications. Without the uplifting of society, and especially of women in relation to the environment and the rural economy, the objectives of economic policies and planning can never be achieved. Women are likely to be hit harder by climate change than men due to their social roles and the simple fact that a majority of the world's poor are women. Real growth and emancipation can only be achieved if there is a proactive upliftment of the masses from acute poverty, unemployment, and socio-economic backwardness. The rural economy of women can only thrive if there is a potent environmental education policy and empowerment of women who are the major force behind most countries' economies. The inter-relationship of land, water, forest, animals with each other can be understood only by women in a broader and more holistic way than any one else. The perfect ecosystem can be maintained only when women will be recognized as the best manager of eco-system. Ecofeminism has become an umbrella term for a diverse and conflicting set of principles. "Ecological Feminism" is the name of a variety of positions that make visible different sorts of

woman-nature connections, claiming that an understanding of these connections is necessary for any adequate feminism, environmentalism, or environmental philosophy. There are many elements that need to go into an eco-feminist ethic and culture for a just and sustainable planet. Women are a largely untapped resource that we must use effectively and justly to combat climate change. They need to be engaged with to prepare communities for the effects of global warming, particularly in developing countries where it will have the most severe impact. 'We' cannot afford to underestimate or neglect the role of women in building a sustainable future for the coming generation.