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Reimagining Sustainability: The Role of Gender Justice in Environmental Policy

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Abstract
This paper explores the intersection of gender justice and environmental sustainability, emphasizing the need to integrate gender perspectives into policy frameworks. Global initiatives led by the United Nations highlight that women are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation yet remain underrepresented in decision-making. The study examines how inclusive policies can enhance sustainability outcomes by promoting equitable resource access, participation, and resilience. It argues that gender-responsive environmental governance is essential for achieving long-term ecological balance and social equity. Strengthening institutional mechanisms and aligning policies with global goals can foster a more just and sustainable future.

Keywords: Gender Justice; Environmental Policy; Sustainability; Climate Change; Equity

1. Introduction

Today, the world is facing major problems such as environmental damage, climate change, and social inequality. These issues are closely connected, and because of this, sustainability has become an important topic across the globe. There is now a strong need for approaches that not only protect the environment but also ensure social fairness and equality.In recent years, the idea of sustainability has expanded. It is no longer limited to environmental protection but also includes social issues like equality, participation, and justice. Many grassroots movements, especially those led by women and marginalized groups, have helped raise awareness and push for more inclusive and community-based solutions. At the same time, governments and international organizations are trying to include these social aspects in their policies. However, there is still a gap between what activists demand at the local level and what is actually implemented in policies.This research paper focuses on the connection between gender, activism, and global sustainability. It aims to understand how the gap between grassroots movements and policy-making can be reduced. By studying different ideas, real-world examples, and policy approaches, this paper seeks to find ways to better connect activism with effective policy implementation.Ecofeminism, like the social movements it has emerged from, is both political activism and intellectual critique. Bringing together feminism and environmentalism, ecofeminism argues that the domination of women and the degradation of the environment are consequences of patriarchy and capitalism. Any strategy to address one must take into account its impact on the other so that women's equality should not be achieved at the expense of worsening the environment, and neither should environmental improvements be gained at the expense of women. Indeed, ecofeminism proposes that only by reversing current values, thereby privileging care and cooperation over more aggressive and dominating behaviors, can both society and environment benefit.[1]

The notion that women's and environmental domination are linked has been developed in a number of ways. A perspective in which women are accredited with closer links with nature was celebrated in early ecofeminist writings, by, for example, Carolyn Merchant in the United States and Val Plumwood in Australia. These advocated 'the feminine principle' as an antidote to environmental destruction, through attributes, which nurture nature. This 'essentialist' perspective, often adopting an ideal of woman as earth mother/goddess, has, however, also discredited ecofeminism and led to disaffection among some early protagonists (see, for example, Janet Biehl). In addition to being critiqued for its essentialism, this view of ecofeminism has also been charged with elitism through its provenance in a white, middle-class, Western, milieu. However, Vandana Shiva's consistent and persuasive 'majority world' voice has been a counterpoint to this, and arguably, gender and environment have been articulated together more powerfully, and been more influential, in majority world settings (see, for example, Wangari Maathai in Kenya), although how this has been done has been questioned by writers such as Cecile Jackson and Melisssa Leach.

The late 1980s and early 1990s was a fertile time for ecofeminist writing, both from this essentialist perspective, but also through more social economic critiques, which explained the link between women's inequality and environmental degradation in terms of women's role in social reproduction (see, for example, Mary Mellor in the UK and Marilyn Waring in New Zealand).

The first major practical impact of ecofeminist thinking was felt in the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), which women's environmental organizations had lobbied for women's and environmental rights to be considered in tandem. This, and the 1995 4th Women's Conference in Beijing, agreed for the first time that women's rights and environmental rights could not be disentangled.[2]

By the late 1990s, however, the output on ecofeminism had dropped significantly and there was a sense of it having run out of steam, despite its arguable influence revealed through UN initiatives. However, in the new millennium, a new generation of writers, researchers, and activists has reinvigorated ecofeminist debates, through considerations of ecofeminist citizenship (Sherilyn MacGregor), challenges to some earlier critiques (Niamh Moore), and insertion of feminist concerns into environmental justice (Susan Buckingham and Rakibe Kulcur, and Giovanna di Chiro) and political ecology (Wendy Harcourt, Dianne Rocheleau).

This article considers the heritage of ecofeminism as a multiply braided political praxis and an intellectual position. It examines key critiques of earlier perspectives, before exploring its more recent developments. It considers its relationship with, and potential to enhance other feminist and environmental approaches, particularly those concerned with feminist political ecology and environmental justice. The article concludes with a consideration of how ecofeminism is enjoying a resurgence through a new generation of academics seeking to develop and nuance ecofeminism from a sympathetic position, the emergence of climate change as a major global issue, and the development of social movements in areas not previously associated with feminist environmental action, notably in the Middle East[2]

Gender in Society

Worldwide, the consequences of the use of categories of gender to create hierarchies of political and economic power can be seen in the material conditions of women and children. In the United States, the feminization of poverty – the increasing tendency for those in poverty to be primarily women and their children – has been documented over the last several decades. During this same period, it has also been conclusively demonstrated that women in the United States are paid less than men for work in the same occupation. An important factor contributing to this situation is women's lack of access to positions of influence and decision-making in government and business – the glass ceiling. Of the CEO's of the Fortune 500 companies in the US in 2005, only eight were women.

Outside the US, especially in the Third World, the political and economic situation for women is very difficult. Despite important strides forward during the United Nations Decade for Women (1985–95) gender inequality is still rife on the global stage. In many countries in the developing world, gender roles restrict women's access to education, to political participation, and to many sectors of the workforce. In some societies, where there are limited social goods available, such as resources for food, healthcare, and school fees, the resources go to men before women, male children before female children. And in countries with government-imposed, or scarcity-imposed restrictions on child-bearing, female fetuses are aborted in favor of bearing male children.

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Responses of gender theorists to these inequities have taken several forms. Some feminists have argued for the extension and modification of the available theoretical tools of Western notions of human rights. For instance, Charlotte Bunch has argued that the traditional notion of human rights is incomplete because it does not universally encompass women's rights. In many societies legal protections are not extended to women in the private sphere, such as protection against domestic violence. Other feminists, especially postmodern and Third World feminists have recognized the gap between the guarantee of procedural rights and the inequity of social outcomes for men and women. They have argued that the Enlightenment notion of human rights is inherently flawed, in that it assumes that the bearer of rights is an independent, white, male property-owner.[3] At its inception and ever since, this notion of rights has operated only in the public sphere for the benefit of men, and has not been extended to guarantee the political, economic, and social rights of women. Even countries that champion human rights still fail to recognize the necessity of protecting women's rights, as is seen in the United States' failure to ratify the United Nations Convention on Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) enacted in 1981. Moreover one could argue that, the insistence by Westerners on imposing their notions of human rights on nations whose cultures do not value individualism, capital and property accumulation, and competition, or share Western ideas of gender and family relations, is a type of cultural imperialism. Responding to these cautions against cultural imperialism, Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen have proposed a capabilities approach to development and rights issues. Nussbaum and Sen argue that there are certain characteristic activities of human beings – capabilities – that can provide a basis for determining what is just in the distribution of resources. These include, among other capabilities, the ability to live out a normal span of life, to have good health, food, shelter, the ability to move around at will, to be educated and to participate in political life, to have choice in reproductive matters and to have sexual and other forms of life-enhancing pleasure, and to avoid unnecessary pain. These capabilities as articulated by Nussbaum and Sen strongly resemble the rights outlined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights which ground many international and local development schemes. They also parallel the work of Johan Galtung and his concept of structural violence which articulates that violence is not merely the direct physical attack but can also come from institutional inequalities. What might seem basic needs to some is to others a potential trip-wire for cultural imperialism. For example there are arguments about whether the capabilities or rights represent a false, and thus unacceptable, essentialism or universalism. This debate is at the center of academic and policy discussions about development and aid for ameliorating the condition of women and children worldwide.[4]

Ecofeminism and Peace

Analyses of the intersectionality of race, class, and gender oppression have been applied in the arena of environmental activism. Ecofeminism has developed as an international movement that includes academic feminists and first and third world environmentalists. Ecofeminism encompasses a variety of approaches to thinking about and acting on behalf of the environment, but all ecofeminists recognize the necessary linkage between a healthy ecology and healthy lives for women and children. Ecofeminists view patriarchy as responsible for both the oppression of women, the poor, and indigenous people and for systems of production and consumption which view nature as a commodity to be used and discarded. Vandana Shiva has argued that in pursuit of an illusion of progress, Third World development projects designed to promote industrialization on the Western model have enriched their Western sponsors while doing little if anything to alleviate the poverty of Third World people. Worse, they have tended to replace small-scale indigenous ecological practices with large-scale degradation of the environment. Shiva distinguishes between material poverty and spiritual poverty. While Third World material poverty is real and highly visible, it is also relative to the supposed superior standard of living of the developed nations. The spiritual poverty in the midst of material plenty of the developed nations – demonstrated by high rates of mental illness, drug addiction, and personal violence – and the relation between spiritual poverty and estrangement from nature, is less visible to Westerners themselves, but still very real.[5]

Sandra Harding and other feminist philosophers of science have argued that science and technology have played a leading role in worldwide patriarchal dominance. The supposed value-neutrality and objectivity of scientific method has cloaked science and its resulting technological advances in an aura of certainty and inevitability. In reality, science has been firmly in the control of and has conferred its benefits upon the wealthy and powerful. Its pretense to being a progressive force for all humankind has served to conceal such damaging results as destabilizing and polluting military technologies, exploitation of natural resources, and unchecked consumption. Harding and others have argued that it is important to recognize the validity of non-Western and indigenous methods of acquiring knowledge. It is also necessary to acknowledge that social contexts and value systems influence all forms of knowledge production, including Western science, so that these practices and their results can be properly examined and critiqued. In the absence of these critiques, science and technology will continue to be a force for widening the gap between the richer and poorer nations, resulting in increasing misery and political instability.[6]

Ecofeminist Themes in Indian Literature

Nature as a Feminine Entity: Indian English literature often portrays nature as feminine (Prakriti), with metaphors of fertility, nurturing, and motherhood. This personification highlights the exploitation of both women and the earth by patriarchal and capitalist forces.

- Marginalization of Women and Nature: Many works emphasise how women, particularly from marginalized communities, suffer disproportionately from environmental destruction.
- Resistance and Activism: Several literary works depict women's role as protectors of nature, inspired by reallife ecofeminist movements like Chipko and Narmada Bachao Andolan.
- Spiritual and Cultural Symbolism: Indian ecofeminist literature often draws from mythological and spiritual traditions, where women and nature are revered as sacred and life-giving

The Importance of Ecofeminism and Environmental Ethics

Women have a key role in making this intergenerational equity a reality. "We women have been the forerunners for generations and leaders in environmental conservation. Our traditional knowledge, know-how and skills are needed more than ever to build resilience to climate impacts and reduce greenhouse gas emissions", said Khadidjath Zimé Arouna – a young woman beneficiary of the Green Amazones Program. Indeed, women are at the forefront of their communities when it comes to finding effective and sustainable solutions to mitigate the impacts of the climate crisis on their own as well as their families' wellbeing.[7]

Ecofeminism is a current of environmental ethics that has been gaining momentum in recent years due to the climate crisis. It puts the question of gender relations and domination in the approach to environmental protection at the centre of its thinking. This current, which believes that there is a link between the exploitation of nature and that of women, advocates principles such as equity (equitable distribution of benefits and burdens), "nothing for us without us" (those closest to the problem are closest to the solutions), and collective access (our movements must be flexible and nuanced in the way we engage with each other). These principles point us to the essence of climate justice, which according to the Mary Robinson Foundation "links human rights and development to achieve a human-centred approach, safeguarding the rights of the most

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vulnerable and sharing the burdens and benefits of climate change and its impacts in an equitable and just manner". Thus, it can be argued that promoting ecofeminism is therefore promoting climate justice.

Policies, democratic institutions, and major organisations at the international level, which are essential to achieving climate justice, must therefore better take into account women's experiences, invest in women leaders and activists who are at the forefront of the ecofeminist movement, and create an enabling environment for them to freely express their thoughts and opinions.[8]

Conclusion:

Ecofeminism is based on the relationship established between women and the environment. In this context, it defends the idea that the patriarchal capitalist system has negative effects on women and the environment. Therefore, ecofeminism has taken its place in feminist literature as not only a feminist approach but also an approach that includes the environmental factor and draws attention to the relationship between women and nature. This approach considers the destruction of the environment and the secondary position of women as interrelated problems and considers patriarchy as the main factor of this problem. At this point, it argues that raising awareness of women and the dissolution of patriarchal systems will reduce environmental destruction. In this context, patriarchy in ecofeminism is problematized with nature and the analysis of the problems that feminism seeks answers to gains a deeper structure. Ecofeminism, which started in the 1970s, has been divided into various branches over time.

This study aims to discuss the validity of the propositions of ecofeminism in the context of the environment and ecology in the context of the 21st century. Although ecofeminism is frequently criticized in the literature, as it lays the groundwork for the reconstruction of gender perceptions it can be considered as an alternative policy in the face of the climate crisis in the world. In light of the findings obtained from the study, it is concluded that women are more affected by environmental problems than men. This situation reveals the importance of an environmental struggle in which women will be the pioneers. Ecofeminism, which draws attention to the disadvantaged position of women with its criticisms of environmental problems, can be considered as a vision for sustainable environmental policies.

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