

## **Ecofeminist Movements— from the North to the South**

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Ecofeminism grows from the idea that a woman's ethics are closer to nature than a man's and it revalue feminine traits. Women are seen in sync with nature, working in union with it, while men have a hierarchical relationship with nature in which their actions try to dominate it. This view poses the idea that men's control over nature has created an ecological crisis in much of the world today. Ecofeminists look for non-violent solutions to world problems. They consider feminine values necessary for survival in the conditions of the world's patriarchy. And while ecofeminists may subscribe to liberal, radical, or Marxist/socialist thought, their main focus is on ecology—both of nature and human systems.

The term Ecofeminism, coined by French feminist Francois d' Eaubonne in 1974, looks at cultural and social concerns dealing with the relationship that the oppression of women has with the degradation of nature. Oppression of women and the environment have been 'twin subordinations', rising some 5,000 years ago with the emergence of Western patriarchy. Patriarchy was based on 'dualism', a concept that separates the body from the mind, male from females, humans from nature. By forcefully dividing these entities into two, a power imbalance is created; giving rise to the abstract 'other' that is then discriminated against. The belief also places more importance on linear, mechanistic and analytical thinking, rather than emotional, earthy qualities which are perceived as passive and weak, and essentially 'female'. And so rose the concept of Ecofeminism. One of the main reasons for its success is that it aims to connect politics with spiritualism. These divergent areas have never before been connected, giving Ecofeminism a fresh, interdisciplinary approach. However, there are also those like Rush Limbaugh who make frequent disparaging comments about ecofeminists, usually referring to them as 'eco-femi-nazis.'

### **2. ECOFEMINISM—A MOVEMENT?**

Academic writings are predisposed to calling Ecofeminism a movement [Nash (1989); Warren (1990); Lahar (1991); Cuomo (1992); Salleh (1992)]. Diamond and

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Orenstein in *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism* (1990) assert that Ecofeminism is a social movement and offer their book as a statement of its ideology. Many other contributors directly state that Ecofeminism is a social movement [e.g. Eisler (1990); Quinby (1990); Plant (1990)]. Others outside Ecofeminism also consider it a movement [Van Gelder (1989); Clausen (1991)].

However, there are also those who contend that Ecofeminism has not yet developed into a social movement. Sale (1987) argues that it is “too early to speak of Ecofeminism as a ‘movement’ ” (p. 302) and that it is best thought of less as a movement than a philosophy—or perhaps not movement at all, in the traditional sense, nor even some kind of “tendency” within a movement, but rather a way of re-regarding the world that can be brought to bear on a whole variety of movements and tendencies. (p. 304)

My own reading of the various texts makes me inclined to think of Ecofeminism as being in a state of embryonic transition. A movement is a powerful, global, well-organised phenomenon that not only captures the attention of the media, but also that of policy makers, students, and academia, but most importantly of the masses. For a researcher from the South, this term still needs to find strong support especially in terms of its advocates and experts. While the North may have forged ahead in the conceptual, practical understanding of this term, the South has yet to catch up. My analysis of the various movements in this paper is indicative of this divide.

### 3. ECOLOGY AND FEMINISM: A COMMON LANGUAGE

Ecofeminism has contributed a great deal both to activist struggle and to theorising links between women’s oppression and the domination of nature over the last two decades. In some ways, it has engaged various forms of exploitation such as gender, race, class and nature. The simultaneous emergence of women and environmental movements raises a question about the relationships between feminism and ecology. Ecology and feminism have an interrelated lexis, and hence similar policy goals. The linkages might be described as follows:

#### (a) All Parts of a System Have Equal Value

Ecology assigns equal importance to all organic and inorganic components in the structure of an ecosystem. Similarly, feminism asserts the equality of men and women and sees intellectual differences as human differences, rather than gender or race specific. The lower position of women stems from culture, rather than nature. Thus, policy goals should be directed towards achieving educational, economic and political equity for all. Ecologists and feminists assign equal value to all parts of the human- nature system and takes care to examine the long and short range consequences of decisions affecting an individual, group or species.

#### (b) The Earth Is a Home

The Earth is a habitat for living organisms, while houses are habitats for groups of humans. For ecologists and feminists the Earth’s house and the human house are habitats to be cherished. Chemicals and all forms of energy that are life defeating and lead to sickness on the planet or in the home are not tolerated. Both try to restore the health of both indoor and outdoor environments.

**(c) Process Is Primary**

The first law of thermodynamics, which is also the first law of ecology, asserts the conservation of energy in an ecosystem, as energy is changed and exchanged in its constant flow through the interconnected parts. All components are parts of a steady process of growth and development, death and decay. The natural processes of the planet are cyclical, balanced by cybernetic, stabilising feedback mechanisms. Any stress on these dynamic processes of nature has implications for human societies. Therefore, an appropriate goal for both environmentalists and feminists is to have open dialogues in which ecologists, technologists, lawyers, workers, men and women participate as equals.

**(d) There Is No Free Lunch**

‘No free lunch’ is the essence of the laws of thermodynamics. To produce organised matter, energy in the form of work is needed. For feminists and ecologists, reciprocity and cooperation rather than free lunches and house hold services are the desirable goals.

The story of a land where women live at peace with themselves and with the natural world is a recurrent theme of feminist utopias. This is a land where there is no hierarchy, among humans or between humans and animals where people care for one another, where the power of technology and of military does not prevail. Feminist vision often draws the contrasts starkly—it is life versus death, Gaia versus Mars, mysterious forest versus technological desert, women versus men. It is hard to deny the power of that vision, or its ability to harness the hope and the sorrow the present world holds for those who can bear to confront its current course. Ecological feminism tells us that it is no accident that this world is dominated by men. Women as a group have a common interest to escape this ancient domination, but ecological feminism is more than the connection of women who happen to be green. There is a romantic conception in the way women and nature is seen. Women have special powers and the capacities of nurturance, empathy and closeness to nature which are un-sharable by men and which justify their special treatment, which of course nearly always turns to be an inferior treatment. One essential feature of ecological feminism is that it gives a positive value to a connection of women with nature which was previously in the West given negative cultural value and which was the main ground of women’s devaluation and oppression. Ecological feminists are involved in a great cultural revaluation of the status of women, the feminine and the natural, a revaluation which must recognise the way in which their historical connection in different cultures has influenced the construction of feminine identity.

**4. WOMEN AND THE ENVIRONMENT: IS THERE A CONNECTION?**

Women world wide, are often the first ones to notice environmental degradation. Women are the first ones to notice when the water they cook with and bathe the children in, smells peculiar: they are the first to know when the supply of water starts to dry up. Women are the first to know when the children come home with stories of mysterious barrels dumped in the creek: they are the first to know when children develop mysterious ailments [Seager (1993), p. 272]. Examining the global economics, services provided by nature (Living forests food, fuel and fodder to women) and women (carrying water,

collecting firewood, weeding and hoeing, bearing children, preparing food) are not factored in Gross National product of a country. Women's contribution in agriculture is more than that of men but still they receive no compensation in economic system, even the agricultural development training is directed towards men.

Nowhere has women's self conscious role as protectors of the environment been better exemplified than during the progressive conservation crusade of the early twentieth century. Although conservation historians have rendered that role all but invisible, women transformed the crusade from an elite male enterprise into a widely based movement. In doing so, they not only brought hundreds of local natural areas under legal protection, but also promoted legislation aimed at halting pollution, reforestation watersheds, and preserving endangered species. Yet this enterprise ultimately rested on their own self interest to preserve their middle class life styles and was legitimated by the separate male/female spheres ideology of nineteenth century aimed at conserving 'true womanhood,' the home and the child. Gifford Picot (1910) in his book *The Fight for Conservation* praised the women of the progressive era for their substantial contributions to conservation. Tracing history and its interpretation is also important for positioning ecological feminism. During Victorian times the argument was that the moral goodness, purity, patience, self sacrifice, spirituality, and maternal instinct of women would redeem fallen political life (if given the vote), or, on the alternate version that they were too good for fallen political life and so should not have the vote. The first version ignores the way in which these qualities are formed by powerlessness and will fail to survive translation to a context of power; the second covertly acknowledges this, but insists that in order to maintain these qualities for the benefit of men, women must remain powerless. The contemporary green version attributes to women a range of different, but related virtues those of empathy, nurturance, cooperativeness, and connectedness to others and to nature, and usually finds the basis for these in women's reproductive capacity. It replaces the 'angel in the house' version of women by the 'angel in the ecosystem' version.

## 5. ECOLOGICAL MOVEMENTS AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN

Many environmental critiques have shown how control over and exploitation of nature is linked to control over and exploitation of human beings [Hecht and Cockburn (1990); Shiva (1989)]. High technology agriculture and forestry in the third world, which is ecologically destructive, also strengthens control of elites and structural social inequality, increasing for example control over the economy, especially at the expense of women. Water and air being free goods for the common become unfit to sustain life as privatised. They become a privilege for those who can afford to pay for them. All those who are without market power (especially the poor, women and children) become the losers and the issue of human justice and destruction of nature converge. During colonial rule women's impoverishment has increased as they were discriminated against access to land, technology and employment. This destructive impact on women and environment extends into a negative impact on children. There is no development report in which status of women and children and the state of environment are used as the indicators of development. Global economic policies are formulated to ensure the safe guard the rights of women and children but the outcome has always been disappointing.

There are of course obvious differences in the environmental issues that face people, especially women in the third world and the North. In non-industrial societies problems revolve around access to clean water and other resources, as well as issues of poverty and health [Asian and Pacific Women's Resource Collection Network (1989)]. In the North, problems are not always so immediate and so visible. Northern ecological damage is more hidden.

Sadly, though, women's role in ecological struggles and debate since the nineteenth century, as with all women's social and political involvement has been 'hidden from history' [Rowbotham (1973)]. The grass roots environmental movement, on the other hand, expands our sense not only of what is possible, but of what is necessary. It is a movement fuelled by persistence, resistance, stubbornness, passion and outrage. Around the world, it is the story of 'hysterical housewives' taking on 'men of reason' - in the multitude of guises in which they appear [Seager (1993), p. 280].

In the South, feminist critics of the 'steam roller' effect of technological modernisation and global capitalism drew attention to the threat to both women and environment from so-called 'development'. They showed how women were experiencing particular hardship, as commercial farming, logging and mining invaded their traditional way of life as they were drawn into highly exploitative and health threatening forms of production [Mies (1986) and Shiva (1989)]. In the North, the harmful social, economic and environmental side effects of consumption centric development came together in Hurricane Katrina which hit the poor African American communities the hardest.

It becomes clear, therefore, that all over the world the major burden of the tremendous costs of this kind of development are historically and structurally borne by the disadvantaged, powerless and underprivileged. And it is this silent majority that has often taken responsibility for ending human exploitation of the earth. Their voices have lead to movements focusing on how to get and use power against the institutions and cultural practices that dominate and subjugate them. Patrice Jones says that 'A movement is a process, not a thing'. In other words, movements are actions, actions that require both motion as well as *emotion*. This means that all of our rationality must flow from and feed into our empathy. Hence, a need to look at the role of women and their movements to preserve and conserve the biosphere.

What is common to women's campaigns in the North and South is their vulnerability to environmental problems and their lack of access to the centres of decision making which cause them. Men having the positions of power and influence make women suffer the consequences of government, military, industrial and commercial decisions without being in a position to influence them.

Even though Ecofeminism explicitly focuses on the relationship between women, society and nature, it would be wrong to limit the description of female perspectives on the environment and society to this feminist approach. The portrayal of the Ecofeminism makes it clear that the effect of women's participation on a national and international level depends to a large extent on their participation in political organisations and scientific institutions, as well as in other areas of public life.

From a historical perspective, the environmental movements in the western industrial countries may be divided in three phases [Pepper (1996)]: (1) the phase of traditional environmental protection at the end of the nineteenth century and the

beginning of the twentieth century; (2) the phase of ecological movements in the 1970s and 1980s; and (3) the phase of the global ecological crises at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of 1990s.

Let us now look at a few of these movements, their origins and progress. A few inspiring movements of Ecofeminism include: the Green Belt Movement in Kenya started by Wangari Maathai in which rural women planted trees as part of a soil conservation effort to avert desertification of their land; the Akwesasne Mother's Milk Project Mohawk established by women along the St. Lawrence River to monitor PCB toxicity while continuing to promote breastfeeding as a primary option for women and their babies; the Greening of Harlem initiated by Bernadette Cozart, a gardener and founder who organises diverse community groups in Harlem to transform vacant garbage-strewn lots into food and flower gardens; Sister Rivers performance ritual in which Japanese women placed rice, seeds, and soil from Hiroshima and Nagasaki in pillowcases and then floated the artwork down the Kama River; the exposure of the Love Canal as a toxic waste site set off by Lois Gibb, and her founding of the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste to share tactical skills with local environmental groups.

It is hard to say why particular examples of grass roots struggles become symbolic of a social movement when there are many examples of similar campaigns elsewhere [Merchant (1992)]. However certain struggles and initiatives illuminate issues and concerns that lie at the heart of those campaigns and the way in which women's relationship to the natural world has been revealed and constructed through them. This is particularly true for the Love Canal campaign, Chipko movement and Green belt movement. I will now focus on the USA, Kenyan, Indian, Bengali and Pakistani cases:

### **Love Canal—United States**

'The majority of activists in the grassroots movement against toxics are women. Many became involved when they experienced miscarriages or their children suffered birth defects or contracted leukemia or other forms of cancer. Through networking with neighbourhood women, they began to link their problems to nearby hazardous waste sites' [Merchant (1980)].

After her son experienced health problems in 1978, homemaker-turned-environmental crusader Lois Gibbs began to lead her Love Canal community of mainly 'lower-middle-class women who had never been environmental activists' but 'became politicised by the life-and-death issues directly affecting their children and homes and succeeded in obtaining redress from the State of New York' [Merchant (1980)]. The experiences of the residents of Love Canal have come to represent the fears of people in industrial societies about the hidden dangers that surround them. However, it was not until women had vandalised a construction site, burned an effigy of the mayor and been arrested in a blockade that government officials began to take notice [Seager (1993)].

Women in other local campaigns were accused of being 'hysterical wives' when they tried to raise issues about the dumping of waste. As one Black woman from Southern United States put it: 'You are exactly right, I am hysterical. When it comes to matters of life and death, especially my family's and mine, I get hysterical.' [Newman (1994)] Involvements in grass roots struggles are politicising increasing numbers of

women. Gibbs's experience at Love Canal and her disillusionment with the democratic process led to her setting up in 1981 a national network, the Citizen's Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste (CCHW), which has supported over four thousand local community campaigns against toxic waste.

According to Seager women who become involved in grass root movements have not been active before and have often faced accusations of ignorance and hysteria, not only from experts and officials, but also from their own male relatives.

### **Chipko Movement—India**

The forest is our mother's home; we will defend it with all our might was the call of the women in the village of Reni in the Garhwal mountains, Himalayan Range [Anandn (1983), p. 182].

The Chipko Resistance Movement, originating in the Garhwal hills of northwest India, where women in villages clung to trees to save them from state-authorised loggers, became emblematic of an international ecofeminist movement eager to showcase the subordination of women and nature and women's environmental consciousness. Vandana Shiva (1989) portrays the poor rural women of Chipko as the redeemers of the environment 'who, as leaders and activists, had put the life of the forests above their own and, with their actions, had stated that nature is indispensable to survival'. (p. 218)

As Sturgeon (1997) astutely notes, 'Positioning women as environmental activists was one moment in a dialectical process of negotiation between dominant interests in development policies and feminist efforts to insert women's concerns into an international arena'. (p. 145)

Interestingly, feminist environmentalists in India do not call themselves ecofeminists, even though they critique the state and the globalised model of economic growth that disempowers poor women's lives in the name of development.

The Indian feminist environmentalist analysis differs from that of Ecofeminism in the following ways: (a) women are not alone in having a special stake in environmental regeneration; (b) what's good for the environment may not be good for the women in question and vice versa; (c) the Indian feminist environmentalists do not advocate a retreat to indigenous social and knowledge systems since that would not alter national or international power structures [Mitter (1995)]; and (d) the ideological linkages between women and nature in the North (i.e., both have been ideologically related and oppressed by patriarchal economy) do not prevail in the South, where the emphasis is on 'the material basis for this link' [Agarwal (1992)].

### **Green Belt Movement—Kenya**

The Kenyan Green Belt Movement (GBM), unlike Chipko, was not a spontaneous action on part of women. In fact thousands of them were inspired in 1977 by the initiative of Professor Wangari Maathai (recipient of Nobel Peace Prize 2004) to launch a rural tree planting program. Its aim was to solve the fuel problem in rural areas, as well as preventing creeping desertification and soil erosion by surrounding each village with a 'green belt' of at least a thousand trees. The movement both reduces the effects of deforestation and provides a forum for women to be creative and effective leaders.

Working with Green Belt gives women the ability to change their environment and make their own decisions. The movement also involves the transfer of technology from experts to the people, turning small-scale farmers into agro-foresters. Ideally, public awareness is raised on issues related to environment and development, and meetings related to tree planting activities encompass discussions on the relationships between food, population and energy.

According to their website, GBM aims to create an understanding of the relationship between the environment and other issues such as food production and health. Education serves a critical role. Children gain exposure through Green Belt projects at their schools; small farmers learn to appreciate the connections between forestry, soil conservation and their own needs for wood.

Involving women as equal participants and developers of the Green Belts leads to a positive self-image for women, and consequently provides models of significant female achievement. Trained to properly plant and cultivate seedlings, women both assist in reforestation and generate a source of income for themselves. Through GB, women's image has been enhanced through public exposure and public awareness of environmental issues has also increased, confirming the essential connections between the improvement of women's condition and the needs of society as a whole. This movement has without question become an inspiration for ecofeminists internationally.

### **Women and Trees—Bangladesh**

'Do sons look after their mothers? No. It is the trees which are more reliable than the sons. If you have a tree you can be sure that at the time of *nidan kal* (the time of death), the funeral cost will be met by the tree,' said an old woman to the researchers of UBINIG<sup>1</sup> who were investigating the role of women in tree planting and their relation to trees in general in Bangladesh. How are women linked to the preservation of the environment through trees? The role of women in tree planting in general and their relationship with trees in particular in Bangladesh is an important step towards environmentalism. Earlier, women's issues and concerns were virtually absent in most studies on forestry and trees, but now with publishing houses like Narigrantha Prabartana, the first and the only Feminist Publishing House in Bangladesh, organisations like UBINIG and activists like Farida Akhter, this has changed.

Farida Akhter's *Women and Trees* documents the outcomes of interviews with rural women offering valuable insights into agrarian households in Bangladesh and the central role that women play in its management and reaffirms the intimate relationship that women have always had with their surroundings. The findings of the study revealed that contrary to popular notion, women from poor families do not destroy trees for firewood. Field contractors, traders in firewood and timber merchants, in fact destroy trees. Women feel emotionally drained when they are suspected of cutting down trees because, being tree planters themselves, they have a deep sentimental attachment towards trees planted in their own homestead. They mainly use dry leaves and broken branches which have already fallen from the main tree, as firewood. But this is obviously not enough for their needs. The problem of shortage of firewood therefore, is a woman's

<sup>1</sup>UBINIG is the abbreviation of its Bengali name *Unnayan Bikalper Nitinirdharoni Gobeshona*. In English it means Policy Research for Development Alternatives.



issue. The study further discovered that one major motive which pushes women to plant trees is that they look upon trees as a means of financial support in case their husbands fail to support them.

### **Ecofeminism in Pakistan**

Women of Pakistan play an important role in environmental conservation. They take care of farmyard manure collection and its application, which has important consequences in soil fertility management. Women possess knowledge of herbs for medicine for both general and reproductive health, food and fodder. They also know the location of pastures and water sources, etc. [Pakistan (1995)].

In the rural areas of Pakistan, agriculture land is owned by men and they use family labour, including women, for producing crops. Sindh Rural Women's Uplift Group tried to help women by engaging them in organic farming, paying them the same salary as men and improving the working conditions. Their full time employment in sustainable agriculture in the past 2 years, in preference to men has changed significantly. Their out put is more than men through the use of sustainable agriculture techniques, and they are financially empowered [Panhwar (2001)].

Pakistan's textile and clothing (T&C) industry stands on women's shoulders. Under the scorching sun, thousands of female cotton pickers work in the cotton fields of Southern Punjab and Sindh,<sup>2</sup> harvesting the raw material for the production of yarn, cloth, trousers, and t-shirts. An estimated 700,000 cotton pickers, most of them women and girls, are employed on the 1.6m cotton-growing farms in Pakistan during the picking season between September and December. The working environment of cotton pickers is full of poisonous pesticides. During the 8-9 hours of daily picking, they are exposed to residuals of pesticide spraying. One of the few studies conducted on the health effects of pesticide application in Pakistani cotton cultivation finds that 74 percent of female cotton pickers are moderately pesticide-poisoned, while the remaining quarter has reached dangerous levels of poisoning [Siegmann (2006)]. This research team at the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) is now working towards creating more awareness of this issue by working with landowners, pesticide producers and retailers. One of the objectives of their work is to organise vulnerable female agricultural workers and empowering them in order to make sure they can jointly voice their concerns and work for improvement of their working conditions.

### **CONCLUSION**

It is clear from the above cases that small movements like the LoveCanal and the GBM quickly gained momentum and successfully led to the formation of organisations and projects in their home countries based on the ideals and actions of those two movements. Both had strong women leaders who started their campaigns at the grass roots level through awareness raising campaigns, walks, demos etc. The domino effect of both continues to inspire their people and nation. Sadly, while Chipko received wide media attention at the time, the so-called ecofeminist 'movement' has slowly but surly died away. Despite my search of various documents and follow-ups with Indian researchers, I could not find a trace of evidence that the remnants of this brave effort had survived anywhere in India, the birthplace of this remarkable story. The case of

<sup>2</sup>Punjab and Sindh are provinces of Pakistan.

Bangladesh and Pakistan is unique. While there are efforts on part of organisations towards mass awareness directed at and for women e.g. to preserve their forests and their cotton fields, the efforts are mostly donor-driven and not coming out of a true felt passion of the women themselves coming out to protest, demanding change. Given the above, it is clear that at least in the agriculture, cotton picking and forestry sectors in Pakistan and Bangladesh we do not find an obvious ecofeminist movement. There may be 'motion' there but what is needed is 'emotion'. The reasons perhaps could be due to cultural, social, political and religious constraints, or perhaps what is missing is that one spark from women like Maathai or Gibbs.

The ecofeminist perspective may not be singularly defined, but there is a sense of unity in its common goal of restoring the quality of the natural environment and for people and other living and non-living inhabitants of the planet. This perspective has at least shed light on why Eurocentric societies, as well as those in their global sphere of influence, are now enmeshed in environmental crises and economic systems that require continuing the ecocide and the dynamics of exploitation. Sadly, it is the gap between philosophy and action which keeps Ecofeminism tenuous and peripheral as a movement.

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