
[Connecting environmental currents and gender](#)

Women often play a crucial role in environmental conflicts over oil extraction, mining and logging activities, shrimp farming and tree plantations. These courageous women do not hesitate to challenge political power, local tyrants and armed violence for protecting the surrounding natural resources they and their family depend on. Therefore they protect their culture, way of life, sacred places, livelihood means and so on. Although this phenomenon is widespread, it remains little studied and so is that of the empowerment that women can achieve through these struggles. This article provides a panorama of the different existing environmental currents and their connection with their gender counterparts, in order to highlight different political ways of considering women's role in environmental struggles.

Environmental currents can support different values going from the most conservative (e.g. conservation in national parks at the cost of indigenous populations' welfare) to the most progressive, where ecological concerns and social equity are intrinsically related as is the case in the socio-environmental mobilizations related to extraction (mining, logging, oil) or production processes (shrimp farming, plantations). In order to understand these distinct positions in the political arena, Martínez-Alier (2002) has proposed to organize them under three broad currents of environmentalism –as detailed below. In addition, we explore how these currents articulate with gender.

First of all, Martínez-Alier identifies the “cult of wilderness” which promotes conservation of a pristine nature free of any human intervention. Its academic support is often conservation biology. Arguably, its feminist counterpart is essentialism, where women and men are regarded as psychologically distinct, as a result of their biological natures, and their attributed roles are therefore not questioned. Women's emancipation, or, better said, their accomplishment, is attained through the valorization of the traditional tasks, characteristics and values associated to their gender. In both cases, the idea is to allocate space or/and bodies to different activities in a dualistic and complementary way, such as industry and conservation –without questioning economic growth– or women and men –without questioning gender relations. “Essentialist” scholars have applied the mythical pristine approach to the relations of women with nature arguing that women are, due to their biology, closer to nature than men. This gave rise to an early branch of ecofeminism (Diamond and Orenstein, 1990; Plant, 1989), challenged by later scholars arguing for a materialist ecofeminism (Mellor, 1997).

Secondly, the environmentalist current of “eco-efficiency” seeks to make economic growth compatible with environmental conservation, by technical change and by economic policies that “internalise” the market's “negative externalities”. Today, it is the dominant current and its foremost academic support can typically be found in environmental economics. It appears in notions such as “ecological modernization”, “clean technologies”, “green accountancy”. It is dominated by technological optimism, and economic growth is seen as enhancing sustainability, as promoted by the World Bank. Increasingly, this current also tends to integrate a gender dimension in its analyses, but in a way similar to the environmental cost approach: as a variable to be internalised. Its counterpart within gender studies manifests itself through political and institutional changes allowing women to access traditionally masculine opportunities and professions by positive discrimination –as a kind of gender mainstreaming. Gender and empowerment questions are generally dealt with in the

perspective of women's catching up with men through their insertion in market economy (wage labour, access to property and credit, education). It is often the Western masculine model that determines the norms to be reached, thereby complying with the dominant ideology of development which demands that non-Western societies catch up with industrialized countries through their rapid insertion in world markets.

Thirdly, we have the current that Martínez-Alier has called "environmentalism of the poor" –or the "environmental justice" movement or "liberation ecology" (Peet and Watts, 1996). This current argues against the negative impacts of economic growth and, more generally, against unequal distribution of economic benefits and socio-environmental impacts of industrialization. It manifests itself through socio-environmental conflicts against the industrial extraction of natural resources (oil, mining and logging activities) or industrial production of bio-resources (tree plantations, shrimp farming). Such conflicts denounce and challenge the access to natural resources and services and the burdens of pollution or other environmental impacts that arise because of unequal property rights and inequalities of power and income. The protagonists of these conflicts are on one hand the state and/or private companies and, on the other, impoverished populations, rural or urban, made up of peasants, indigenous people or wagedworkers, claiming social justice. This current often remains invisible because it contests the dominant discourse on the economy but also because the category of "the poor" is somewhat vague. The category comprises (1) urban disadvantaged populations, more or less integrated into the market system but unable to make a proper living in it; (2) indigenous groups not integrated into the market and considered as "poor", though many of them are not such, as they adapt to their surrounding natural wealth without undermining it; and (3) rural populations that have been impoverished by the market system and that fight to protect the ecosystems upon which they depend. Of course, not all poor people are environmentalists, but in many environmental conflicts, the poor are on the side of the conservation of natural resources, because of their own livelihood needs or in order to protect their health. Their idiom is not a unified language; it is often not the language of Western ecology, nor is it that of standard economics: local populations may use the language of defence of human rights, the urgencies of livelihood, the need for food security, the defence of cultural identity and territorial rights, the respect for sacredness. However, the language of Western environmentalism is increasingly used for strategic reasons (communication, visibility, protection), because it fits well into their demands, and because there is a globalization of environmental concerns. Interestingly, the socio-environmental movements who succeed in getting an international visibility are the ones who have combined a specific cultural identity (including territorial rights, livelihood, sacredness) with elements of Western environmentalism (ecosystem conservation, biodiversity). This is the case, for example, of well-known movements such as the Seringueiros one in Brazil (associated with the figure of Chico Mendes), the Chipko movement in India and the Green Belt Movement in Kenya (associated with the figure of Wangari Maathai), but it is also the case of many other more recent movements such as for example the one of FUNDECOL in Ecuador fighting against shrimp farming, etc.

Guha (2000) summarizes the differences between the "cult of wilderness" and the "environmentalism of the poor" as follows: "While Northern greens have been deeply attentive to the rights of victimized or endangered animal and plant species, Southern greens have generally been more alert to the rights of the less fortunate members of their own species". The academic support for this current would be ecological anthropology, agro-ecology, political ecology and sometimes ecological economics.

The feminist counterpart of this current could be called the "ecofeminism of the poor" or "liberation feminist ecology". In many environmental conflicts women play a key role –as is the case in the movements mentioned above. The gender division of work, power and access rights to natural

resources, implying specific responsibilities, knowledge, and action spheres make women and men perceive differently industrial exploitation. By mobilizing to preserve ecosystems, feminine impoverished populations undertake actions in new spheres, start new activities, and question gender identities and relations within their own society. What is more, in some cases they try to connect with the market system through their own organizational networks. This empowerment moves forward through a bottom-up process. Academic fields that support these movements and analyse the ways that gender relations structure –and are structured by– environmental management, policies and changes are feminist environmentalism (Agarwal, 1992), feminist political ecology (Rocheleau et al., 1996), socialist or materialist ecofeminism (Mellor, 1997; Merchant, 1992), ecofeminist political economy (Mellor, 2006) and feminist ecological economics (Perkins and Kuiper, 2005; Perkins, 2007; O'Hara, 2009). While the two first fields develop a case study approach, the two subsequent are more interested in the philosophy of economic theory. The last one, for its part, tends to integrate these two approaches incorporating elements of ecological economics, such as time, local economies, valuation, and sustainability.

The role of women in environmental conflicts is often not well known. Sometimes, women instigate the struggle, sometimes they lead and organize the struggle, sometimes they interact with men in the conflicts, sometimes they confront men through the conflicts and sometimes men have leading roles in struggles while women constitute the backbone of the movement. This has different impacts in term of empowerment. Agarwal (2001) proposed a table for analysing the different roles that can be undertaken by women:

Table 1. *Typology of participation*

| Form/Level of participation | Characteristic features |
|--|--|
| Nominal participation | Membership in the group |
| Passive participation | Being informed of decisions <i>ex post facto</i> ; or attending meetings and listening on decision-making, without speaking up |
| Consultative participation | Being asked an opinion in specific matters without guarantee of influencing decisions |
| Active-specific participation | Being asked to (or volunteering to) undertake specific tasks |
| Active participation | Expressing opinions, whether or not solicited, or taking initiatives of other |
| Interactive (empowering) participation | Having voice and influence in the group's decisions |

Women's role in environmental conflicts has the potential to redress the unequal distribution of the benefits and costs related to the industrial exploitation of natural resources as well as to challenge local masculine domination. When women take active part in the struggles – either leading, organizing or actively participating in the decisions – they often redefine their social position within their own culture, while at the same time challenging the global economy.

By Sandra Veuthey, e-mail: sandra_veuthey@hotmail.com

References

- Agarwal, B., 1992. "The gender and environment debate: lessons from India". *Feminist Studies* **18**: 119–158.
- Agarwal, B. 2001. "Participation Exclusion, Community Forestry, and Gender: An Analysis for South Asia and a Conceptual Framework". *World Development* **29**(10): 1623-1648.

-
- Diamond, I., Orenstein, G.F. (Eds.), 1990. *Reweaving the World*. Sierra Club Books, San Francisco.
- Guha, R., 2000. *Environmentalism: A Global History*. Longman, New York.
- Martínez-Alier, J., 2002. *The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation*. Edward Elgar, Cheltenham.
- Mellor, M., 1997. *Feminism and Ecology*. University Press, New York.
- Mellor, M., 2006. "Ecofeminist political economy". *International Journal of Green Economy* **1**: 139–150.
- O'Hara, S., 2009. Feminist ecological economics: theory and practice. In: Salleh, A. (Ed.), *Eco-Sufficiency and Global Justice*. Pluto Press, New York, pp. 152–175.
- Peet, R., Watts, M., 1996. *Liberation Ecologies*. Routledge, London.
- Perkins, E., Kuiper, E., 2005. "Exploration: feminist ecological economics". *Feminist Economics* **11**: 107–150.
- Perkins, E., 2007. "Feminist ecological economics and sustainability". *Journal of Bioeconomy* **9**: 227–244.
- Plant, J., 1989. *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*. Green Print, London.
- Rocheleau, D., Thomas-Slayter, B., Wangari, E., 1996. *Feminist Political Ecology: Global Issues and Local Experiences*. Routledge, New York.