

Ecofeminism within Gender and Development

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*It is for the union of you and me
that there is light in the sky.
it is for the union of you and me
that the earth is decked in dusky green.*

*It is for the union of you and me
that night sits motionless
with the world in her arms;
dawn appears opening the eastern door
with sweet murmurs in her voice.*

*The boat of hope sails along on the currents of
Eternity towards that union,
Flowers of the ages are being gathered together
For its welcoming ritual.*

From R.Tagore's Our Universe

Ecofeminism in Relation to Gender and Development

Women and Development

The 20th century witnessed a movement from colonial trans-national power structures, to development models that purported to be in the best interest of both developing and developed countries, but have often been accused of being neo-colonial. The term 'development' denotes a set of improvements in standards of living over time, (Visvanathan, et al, 1997) but what criteria is utilised for such analysis? Traditional development models emphasise economic development over other aspects as both the conduit to development and the final objective. However, after many decades of formalised development initiatives, the global distribution of wealth shows a worsening disparity between the rich and the poor (Sittarak, 1998).

With the advent of the women's movement, particularly in the latter half of the 20th century, many organisations had begun to explore the links between development and women's issues. Previous to this, women had historically been excluded from development methods, or their roles were seen as secondary to the potential economic gains that could be realised by encouraging men's input into local economies, mainly through modernisation and expansion of local industry. This modernisation theory assumed that the root cause of poverty and oppression was the lack of participation of oppressed groups in local economies (Visvanathan, et al, 1997). As a result, modernisation theory tended to view all forms of development in economic terms, ignoring other aspects of society, or assuming that an improvement in economic well-being would foster such things as access to improved healthcare. Even though modernisation theory emphasised the need for all people to participate in economic activities (Visvanathan, et al, 1997) the theory was still developed and run by men and lacked an understanding of women's roles in development.

In the early 1970's, American liberal feminists began to look at modernization theory and realise that it had failed to positively effect the position of women. The publication of Ester Boserup's book *Women's Role in Economic Development* had profound effects upon feminist theory in relationship to development models (Mellor, 1997) and influenced the creation of subsequent theories. The theory of Women in Development (WID) was hence created to encourage women to participate in economic activities and involve them in the development process. The emphasis on women's productive contribution was thought to lead to the road of emancipation (Hoogvelt, 1997). However, WID failed to challenge the existing modernisation theory's power structure, or to

question the underlying causes of oppression. It was also accused of ignoring the reproductive roles of women (Visvanathan, et al, 1997).

By the late 1970's however, feminists began to realise that women were already an integral part of the economy, regardless of their apparent exclusion from economic theories of the time. It became apparent that women's roles in society, both reproductive and productive, were a crucial element of civil society (Visvanathan, et al, 1997) although they often fell outside the parameter of academic investigation. The concept of Women and Development (WAD) was solidified as a theory in 1975 during the UN conference on Women and Development held in Mexico, which was also the start of the UN Decade of Women (Sturgeon, 1997). The theory was increasingly interested in the relationship of women in the development process. WAD was criticised however, for still failing to uncover the underlying framework of oppression and assumed that once equality was firmly imbedded in international structures, women's positions would improve. In addition, both WID and WAD were heavily criticised by "southern" feminists as being a "northern" (or western) feminist route to further neo-colonialism (Sturgeon, 1997). At the same time, a realisation began to emerge that women's participation in economic processes did not lead to emancipation, but rather introduced the double burden on women of production (often unskilled, low paid factory work) and reproduction (and related household management activities) (Momsen, 1995).

In the 1980's, the focus of women's role in development shifted to a more socialist perspective. Gender and Development (GAD) theory offered a more holistic angle, which acknowledged women's productive and reproductive tasks and even questioned the existing power structures leading to oppression. The shift from a focus on women as individual entities, to a focus on gender relations was created in answer to the central criticism of WAD and WID and gender neutrality was no longer sought (Sturgeon, 1997). Under this paradigm, both men and women were welcomed as agents of change and women were encouraged to organise themselves as activists and lobby for change.

Running parallel to these three main theoretical debates was another theory that looked at traditional development theory in relation to women, but additionally examined environmental concerns. WID, WAD and GAD were all accused of being anthropocentric (human centred) and more holistic ideologies were emerging. A new perspective was created to acknowledge the needs of the environment and take those needs into consideration when applying development models. Women, Environment and

Development (WED)¹, which was also known as ecofeminism, particularly scrutinized the correlation between the oppression of women and the oppression of the environment. WED, sometimes referred to as GED (Gender, Environment and Development), is still struggling for acceptance and a wider audience, though it has been in existence for a number of decades and solidified as a theory in the 1980's.

What is ecofeminism?

Ecofeminism has become an umbrella term for a diverse and conflicting set of principles. Many texts compare the term 'ecofeminism' to a woven tapestry or of a complex quilt made up of diverse ideas and beliefs, yet united together under a common principle of female interaction within the environment. On a very basic level, ecofeminists are unified in the exploration of the commonalities between gender oppression and environmental degradation mainly caused by male Western dominance.

Bina Agarwal (1997) succinctly describes four main overlying precepts in ecofeminism, the first, being just mentioned. The second, states that men are more related to culture and that women are related to environment. Culture has been seen as superior to the 'untamed' environment and hence both women and the environment have been subjugated by men, which is seen as dominant over an 'untamed' environment. Women are related to the environment. Thus, women and the environment share a common inferior position. Thirdly, oppression of women and the oppression of nature have occurred simultaneously and thus women have a responsibility to cease male domination over both. Fourthly, ecofeminism seeks to combine feminism and ecological thought, as they both work towards egalitarian, non-hierarchical structures.

It is important to note that feminists formulated the theory of ecofeminism at a time when the green movement was popular, so although ecological ethics are of primary concern, ecofeminists are feminists first (Drengson, 2001). The spectrum of ideas encompassed within this paradigm vary from rigid academic endeavours to proposing an innate female spiritual nurturing power over nature. The latter has been heavily criticised by some as anti-intellectual and overly intuitive, to such a point that some scholars distance themselves from the title 'ecofeminist' (Sturgeon, 1997).

¹ Although there has been some differentiation between ecofeminism and WED, for the sake of this essay I will refer to them as one and the same

Several authors (Momsen, 1995; Visvanathan, et al, 1997; Sturgeon, 1997; Turpin, et al, 1996; Mies et al, 1993 and Mellor, 1997) have stated that certain ecologically damaging issues have more of a detrimental effect on women than on men, particularly as women tend to be more involved in family provisions and household management. Such problems include sustainable food development, deforestation, desertification, access to safe water, flooding, climate change, access to fertile land, pollution, toxic waste disposal, responsible environmental management with in companies and factories, land management issues, non-renewable energy resources, irresponsible mining and tree felling practices, loss of biodiversity (fuel, medicines, food). As household managers, women are the first to suffer when access to sustainable livelihoods are unbalanced. When the water becomes unpotable, the food stores dry up, the trees disappear, the land becomes untenable and the climate changes, women are often the ones who need to walk further and work harder to ensure their families survival. It has been found that in times of economic crisis, it is the women who shoulder the burden and they are the first to go without provisions such as food, medicine and education (Momsen, 1995).

The term Ecofeminism was coined in France in 1974 by Francois d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*. However the term did not appear in America until 1980, with Ynestra King's *The Eco-feminist Imperative* (Sturgeon, 1997). The concept was, however, appearing throughout the 1970's with authors like Rosemary Radford-Ruether's *New Woman, New Earth- Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (1975), Susan Griffin's *Women and Nature - The Roaring Inside Her* (1978) and Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature - Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1980) and Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* (1979). These authors were not yet connected with the term 'ecofeminism', but their adaptation of feminism was heavily rooted in the environmental or green movement and peace movements of the 1970's (Twine, 2001). As a result, the ecofeminists of the 1970s were far from constituting a cohesive group (Sturgeon, 1997).

It was not until the 1980's that ecofeminist moved into the realm of academic study (Twine, 2001). The dominant names throughout the 1980's and 1990's included Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva (one of the leading southern ecofeminists), Ariel Salleh, Greta Gaard, Val Plumwood, Noel Sturgeon and Karen Warren. The diversity of proponents now crosses most continents and several disciplines. The 1980's were also marked by

several international conferences on issues linking gender oppression and environmental concerns.

One of the largest issues currently facing the ecofeminist movement is the diverse range of its proponents. Both spiritual and cultural ecofeminists have often been criticised for their radical and unacademic tenets and other groups of feminists are not willing to be associated with them or the term 'ecofeminist'. The WEDO (Women's Environmental and Development Organisation), one of the leading activists for WED, avoids the use of the term 'ecofeminist'. Through WEDO, (eco)feminists had a strong voice at the UN conference on Environment and Development in Rio in 1992, as a result of their document entitled *Women's Action Agenda 21*. It was created based on the World Congress for a Healthy Planet in Miami held the previous year. The movement away from the term 'ecofeminist' has sparked some further schisms, such as deep ecology and feminism, ecosophy and feminism and ecological feminism to name a few. However for the sake of this short essay, we will focus on the two main divisions, cultural and social ecofeminism.

Cultural and Social Ecofeminism

The main difference between cultural and social ecofeminism, are their designation of the relationship between women and their environment. Cultural ecofeminists 'naturalise' woman's role with nature (Twine, 2001). They maintain that because of historical constructs that place men in a position of authority over both women and the environment, women, particularly in the south, (Mies, et. al., 1993) are more closely entwined with environmental issues (Twine, 2001). Within the discipline, spiritual ecofeminists would take this a step further and say that women, as givers of life are engendered to closer connections with the earth (Sturgeon, 1997). Twine (2001) argues that little remains of such anti-academic, sentimental writings in today's ecofeminism, however the association still persists. When Carol Gilligan published *In A Different Voice* (1982) she stated that women differ fundamentally from men and she emphasised the socialisation process and the biological differences that cause women to be more associated with caring and nurturing, It was at this time that the ethics of care became closely associated with feminism and ecofeminism, particularly cultural ecofeminism (Shildrik, 2001).

Social Ecofeminism, according to Plumwood (1992), is steeped in historical rhetoric, going back far as the Greeks to the inferiorisation of both women and nature. Unlike cultural ecofeminism, it does so without romantic overtones and feminine constructs, but rather looks at the historical socialisation of women and nature as subjugated (Twine, 2001). Social ecofeminism resists the urge to overestimate social constructs such as male oppressor/female oppressed and so places it in a position to be more open to other oppressed groups (Twine, 1997).

Closely linked to social ecofeminism are ideologies like deep ecology (broad, long term, ecological conservation through fundamental structural changes) and ecosophy (philosophy of ecological harmony) (Drenson, 2001). Ecological feminism is a branch of social ecofeminism that rejects the reductionist dogma of ecofeminism and allows more space for diversity of race, gender and class within its discourse.

Ecofeminism and development; examples in practice

Several examples of grassroots movements have been tied to ecofeminism because they interrelated environmental conservation and feminist approaches. Although there may be many more similar instances, these high profile cases brought ecofeminism into wider public attention and grounded an esoteric theory with a more pragmatic outcome.

Love Canal - Niagara Falls, U.S.

In the U.S. around the same time as the incident at Three Mile Island (a partial nuclear meltdown and the worst nuclear accident in the United States), concern was growing over industrial pollutants. It had been well over a decade since Rachel Carson published her book *Silent Spring* (1962) warning of the inherent dangers of the build up of herbicides and pesticides in the environment. In 1979 a blue-collar suburb of Niagara Falls, the Love Canal, was experiencing a disproportionate number of health concerns (particularly stillborns, miscarriages and birth defects). Local resident, Lois Gibbs, tracked the instances and linked the cause to a neighbouring dump containing 20,000 tonnes of toxic waste that had been covered over and rezoned for residential building. A school was built directly on top of the site. The authorities refused to believe Ms. Gibbs, even after she acquired statistical confirmation of her suspicions and so she launched a two-year campaign demanding relocation to a safe neighbourhood. It was not until local activists vandalised public property that local officials took notice and eventually

concurred with Gibbs that the toxic waste was the source of the health problems (Mellor, 1997).

This case was one in a series at the time in North America that empowered housewives and other women into a more organised form of action and activism.

Kenyan Green Belt Movement

In 1977, Professor Wangari Maathai launched a rural tree-planting scheme aimed at alleviating fuel shortages and ceasing the encroachment of desertification and soil erosion by planting approximately 1000 trees near threatened villages. Due to the success of her initiative, thousands were convinced to initiate tree planting schemes of their own. This was a woman-centred program that was organised by the National Council of Women. The scheme set up hundreds of tree nurseries and employed thousands of women. Inspired by Maathai, similar schemes were set up in various other African nations and several US inner cities. For this simple act, Maathai was placed under house arrest and severely beaten in the early 1990s (Mellor, 1997).

Chipko Movement – India

The Chipko movement in India is probably the most famous of the three examples and much written about by ecofeminist Vandana Shiva. In the mid-1970's, India forests were being cut down and replaced by commercial eucalyptus and pine forests, destroying women's ability to provide for their families. In response women protested by hugging trees and managed to influence the government to initiate a moratorium on tree-felling. This in turn gave rise to interest in preventing soil erosion and loss of biodiversity in indigenous forests. The movement was linked and in some cases supported by organisations started by Gandhi (Mellor, 1997).

Critique of ecofeminism

Early essay works of ecofeminism tended to lean towards spiritual and cultural discourses, particularly with romantic notions of women as protectors of gaia (mother earth) and didactics centred on the ethics of care. These spiritual aspects of ecofeminism were heavily criticised as anti-intellectual by some. Unfortunately, this perception has lingered and Noel Sturgeon (1997) has pointed out that being associated with ecofeminism is seen negatively, despite the clear movement away from spiritual notions. This has caused ecofeminism to be robbed of being a stronger, larger and more

cohesive movement, but it has also complicated the exploration and expansion of spiritual ecofeminism

Another criticism of ecofeminism results from its lack of clarity as a theory. The cleavages between the differing types of ecofeminism leave the overall theory full of holes. This diversity however, is seen as a positive aspect by some like Arne Naess (Drengson, 2001).

Ecofeminism has also been criticised for failing to embrace diversity amongst women. It would be a fallacy to assume that all women are working together towards a final objective, and as such it would also be false to assume the same amongst ecofeminists. Further, few of the authors in ecofeminism have integrated a capacity for class, geographical, ethnic or racial divisions and have thus created further divisions between the north and the south. Chris Coumo, in separating herself from ecofeminism and aligning herself with ecological feminism said that this was one of the main problems with ecofeminism (Cuomo, 1998).

Finally, ecofeminism, in its attempt to academicise itself, seems to have become stuck in the clouds of theoretical debate. Although there have been pockets of activism by women for the environment, it is doubtful how much effect the development of ecofeminism has yet had on both women in the north and the south. It has remained thus far, within the constraints of academic and philosophical (spiritual) debate. The literature review for this essay failed to uncover common sense notions relating to women and their environment. Women are uniquely placed, particularly in the south, to effect change and protect their environment on a grass roots level. Ecofeminism attempts to make change at a macro level, but it may possibly be more effective at a grassroots initiative, as was seen in the three examples given.

Despite these criticisms, ecofeminism has a strong basis in egalitarian development and it is beyond debate that environmental issues have become paramount. Drengson (2001) tells us that our ecological footprint (the land measure of our impact on the natural world) is 50 times greater in industrial nations than in non-industrial nations. A debate that includes both gender oppression and ecological domination is one that can inform us on various levels, ethically, politically, environmentally, socially and hopefully practically. It could be argued that WED, like WID, WAD and GAD have done a great

deal to inform us of alternative issues in development and have highlighted the need to include gender in development issues.

Regardless of the position of ecofeminism, its two components, ecology and feminism have both obtained mainstream recognition. After Agenda 21 in Rio, sustainable (environmental) development has become normative terminology in the voluntary and non-governmental sector. Focus for funding of development projects has shifted and many now embrace and focus on women-centred programs.

Ecofeminism and Social Professions

While it is not the primary focus of this essay, I would like to briefly mention the links between social professions and ecofeminism. Social professions include pragmatic and human focused disciplines such as social work, community development and grassroots initiatives. To my knowledge, links have not been highlighted between these two disciplines (particularly social work), making a strong case for further research in this direction.

I discussed earlier how aspects of ecofeminism lacked solidity and pragmatic application. However, I believe that the social professions have a great deal to learn from the concept of ecofeminism. Specifically, ecofeminism can underline the structural inequities within our existing society, such as the lack of females in upper management roles and make the social disciplines more environmentally aware.

Social work is one of the few professions that began predominantly as a female and incidentally voluntary activity and continues to be dominated by a disproportionate number of female practitioners. In fact, a study carried out at the University of East London, by Karen Lyons and Mary Wallis-Jones for CCETSW found that only 1/5 of social work graduates in Britain in the years 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996 and 1998 were male. In a subsequent book, Lyons (1999) went on to say that although women were predominant within the area of social work, they were unsurprisingly underrepresented within senior management of both social work practice and social work educational institutions in the UK. This phenomena is also echoed in other countries and possibly within other social disciplines such as sociology.

In addition to recognising the impact of women in these professions, social professions in general must also incorporate more environmentally aware concepts. Community development is one specific aspect of the social professions that recognises the links between social issues and the environment. However, the other disciplines within the social professions have been slow to take the environment into account. A recent publication in the *Journal of International Social Work* by Marlow and Van Rooyen suggests that social work needs to embrace environment issues within its parameters. I would argue that as issues like global citizenship become more relevant and resources more scarce, environmental issues should become more interlaced within all professions, but social professionals in particular as they tend to deal with oppressed populations. It is these oppressed people who tend to suffer more the consequences of ecological damage (Turpin, et al, 1996).

It seems to me that the profession of social work mirrors tenets within the theory of ecofeminism. Additionally, the main proponents of both are female. Both social work and ecofeminism are immersed in egalitarian concerns and anti-oppression activism. I would further argue that social professionals, could and should be concerned with environmental concerns as they are beginning to impinge on issues like health (as in cases of environmental illnesses like malaria, dengue fever, yellow fever, but also issues like famine and hunger, etc.), resource provisions (water, fuel, food, housing) and quality of life issues. Further, social work education has long since borrowed ideas from both 'feminist' literature and 'anti-racist' perspectives, particularly in the UK (Lyons, 1999).

I have argued that one of the downfalls of ecofeminism is its surrounding rhetoric and lack of action, however, I think that the epistemological basis of ecofeminism can enlighten social work practice, and conversely the pragmatic emphasis of social work may also inform ecofeminism and again this is an area where more work and research could be done.

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