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## Ecofeminism: Gender and Environment Intersection

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**Abstract** This paper delves into the complex connections between gender and environmental narratives using the framework of ecofeminism. Emerging in the 1970s, ecofeminism highlights the strong link between the maltreatment of women and the destruction of the environment. Building on the foundational ideas of thinkers like Françoise d'Eaubonne and Vandana Shiva, this approach challenges the patriarchal structures that drive both environmental harm and gender inequality. The paper delves into the historical development of ecofeminism, tracing its evolution from grassroots movements like the Chipko Movement in India to its current status as a global, multi-faceted framework. It further examines the theoretical foundations of ecofeminism, encompassing cultural, socialist, spiritual, and materialist strands, and highlights the importance of intersectionality, as articulated by scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, in understanding the overlapping systems of oppression that shape both gender and environmental policies. The paper also engages with critiques of ecofeminism, particularly those that challenge its essentialist tendencies and its occasional overemphasis on Western perspectives. Finally, the discussion turns to the future of ecofeminism, emphasizing the need for greater inclusivity and the integration of aboriginal education systems in the face of escalating global environmental challenges. Through this comprehensive analysis, the paper underscores the continued relevance of ecofeminism as a critical framework for addressing the intertwined crises of environmental degradation and gender inequality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Keywords** Ecofeminism, Gender, Environment, Intersectionality, Patriarchal Systems, Environmental Justice, Indigenous Knowledge, Decolonial Theory, Feminist Theory, Global South.

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### Introduction

Where earth and woman both are bruised, their silent cries entwine. In nature's heart and in her womb, the wounds of time align. To heal the soil and soul alike, together must we rise, for in the cradle of the earth, all life and love resides." Ecofeminism, a movement that intersects ecological and feminist discourses, posits a profound connection between the sufferings of women and the degradation of the ecosystem. The concept of ecofeminism emerged in the 1970s, initially articulated by the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in her work *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (D'Eaubonne 1974). In other words, Ecofeminism is a branch of feminist theory that considers the kinship between women and nature. It posits that societal patriarchal dominance is associated with gender equality, social justice, and environmental issues. "Ecofeminist theory asserts a feminist perspective of Green politics that calls for an egalitarian, collaborative society in which there is no one dominant group (Merchant 2005). Today, there are several branches of ecofeminism, with varying approaches and analyses, including liberal ecofeminism, spiritual/cultural ecofeminism, and social/socialist ecofeminism" (Merchant 2005).

Ecofeminists primarily stress the link between women's rights and environmental issues, promoting a perspective that reveres the Earth as sacred and acknowledges humanity's reliance on nature. Since then,



ecofeminism has evolved into a multi-faceted framework addressing various aspects of the relationship between gender, the environment, and socio-political structures. At its core, ecofeminism critiques patriarchal systems that perpetuate both the exploitation of nature and the subjugation of women. As ecofeminist scholars argue, the systemic logic that underpins environmental degradation is intrinsically linked to the mechanisms of gender oppression (Salleh, 1997). This chapter delves into the historical development of ecofeminism, its theoretical foundations, and its relevance in contemporary discourse on environmental justice and gender equality. Additionally, it explores the intersectionality of ecofeminism, its critiques, and the ongoing evolution of the movement in response to global environmental challenges.

### **Historical Context of Ecofeminism**

Ecofeminism appeared in the late 20th century, rooted in the recognition of the parallels between the exploitation of women and nature. The movement gained momentum during the 1970s and 1980s, a period marked by rising environmental awareness and the growth of feminist thought. Key historical events, such as the environmental activism of Rachel Carson, whose 1962 book “Silent Spring” highlighted the dangers of pesticide use, and the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, laid the groundwork for ecofeminist theory. The Chipko Movement in India, which began in the 1970s, provides a concrete example of ecofeminist activism. In Uttarakhand, rural women organized peaceful protests against deforestation by embracing trees to stop their removal. This movement highlighted the strong bond between women and the environment in rural areas, where women frequently serve as the main caretakers of natural resources (Shiva and Mies 1993). “The Chipko Movement not only was an early form of ecofeminism because the movement was run by mostly women, but the values aligned by using female empowerment to force ecological protection” (Petruzzello, 2019).

Ecofeminism thus challenges both the environmental destruction driven by industrial capitalism and the social hierarchies that perpetuate gender inequality, advocating for a holistic approach to justice that encompasses both ecological sustainability and gender equity. Hence, ecofeminism arose during the 1970s and 1980s as feminist thinkers began to question the androcentric perspectives that dominated both environmental discourse and political activism. Ynestra King, a key figure in early ecofeminism, highlighted “the systemic connection between the explanation of nature and the oppression of women, emphasizing the patriarchal logic that justifies both forms of exploitation” (King 1989).

During this period, feminist scholars and activists increasingly recognized that environmental issues could not be separated from questions of gender justice. Vandana Shiva, a prominent ecofeminist from India, argued that “patriarchal capitalism exploits both nature and women, particularly in the Global South”. In her work *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (1988), Shiva critiques the Western model of industrialization, which she terms “maldevelopment,” for its destructive impact on ecosystems and traditional livelihoods, especially those of women (Shiva 1988). This perspective highlights the global dimensions of ecofeminism, linking environmental degradation with economic exploitation and colonial histories.

### **Theoretical Foundations of Ecofeminism**

Ecofeminism encompasses various theoretical approaches, each offering a distinct perspective on the relationship between gender and the environment. The major strands include cultural ecofeminism, socialist ecofeminism, spiritual ecofeminism, and materialist ecofeminism.

- 1. Cultural Ecofeminism:** Cultural ecofeminism emphasizes the deep connections between women and nature through cultural and spiritual practices, arguing that women have historically maintained a closer relationship with the natural world due to their roles in reproduction, caregiving, and sustenance. This perspective challenges patriarchal societies that have devalued both women and nature, viewing them as chaotic and inferior. Cultural ecofeminists seek to reclaim and celebrate feminine qualities like nurturing and empathy, seeing these as vital for fostering a sustainable and harmonious relationship with the earth. A central tenet is the reclamation of the feminine divine, which has been marginalized by patriarchal religions that prioritize male deities and the domination of nature. By reviving ancient practices that honored goddesses and viewed the earth as sacred, cultural ecofeminists aim to empower



women and cultivate deeper respect for the environment. They also critique the impact of industrialization and globalization, advocating for bioregionalism and localism to preserve cultural and ecological diversity. However, cultural ecofeminism has faced criticism for potentially essentializing women by linking them too closely with nature and for romanticizing pre-industrial or indigenous cultures. Despite these critiques, it remains the strongest framework for exploring the intersections of Gender, culture, and environmental sustainability (Mies & Shiva, 1993; Starhawk, 1990). Ariel Salleh critiques this association, noting that it has been used to justify hierarchical power structures that subordinate both women and the natural world (Salleh, 119). Cultural ecofeminists seek to reclaim these associations in a positive light, emphasizing the roles of women as caretakers and protectors of the Earth.

2. **Socialist Ecofeminism:** Socialist ecofeminism merges ecofeminist and socialist principles, asserting that environmental degradation, gender oppression, and economic exploitation are intertwined issues rooted in capitalist systems that prioritize profit over ecological and social well-being. It critiques capitalism for exploiting both nature and marginalized groups, particularly women, who are often relegated to undervalued or unpaid labor. Socialist ecofeminists advocate dismantling capitalist structures and replacing them with more equitable systems that emphasize collective ownership and resource redistribution to address both environmental and social injustices. They highlight the need to recognize and value reproductive labor, traditionally performed by women, as crucial to societal and ecological health. While socialist ecofeminism challenges the devaluation of women's work and nature, it faces criticism for potentially overlooking the diverse experiences of women across different cultural and economic contexts. Despite this, it remains a vital framework for exploring the intersections of gender, class, and environmental justice (Mellor, 1997; Salleh, 2017). Mary Mellor argues that capitalist systems rely on the exploitation of both natural resources and women's unpaid labor, contributing to environmental destruction and social inequality (Mellor 1987). Socialist ecofeminism calls for the restructuring of economic systems to prioritize sustainability, social equity, and the recognition of women's labor, both paid and unpaid.
3. **Spiritual Ecofeminism:** Spiritual ecofeminism emphasizes the deep, often sacred, connection between women and the natural world, drawing on spiritual and religious traditions to advocate for ecological and gender justice. This perspective asserts that many ancient and indigenous cultures recognized the divine and sacred aspects of nature and the feminine, often through goddess worship and nature-centered rituals. Spiritual ecofeminists argue that patriarchal societies have suppressed these spiritual traditions, leading to a disconnection from the earth and the marginalization of women. By reclaiming and revitalizing these spiritual practices, they seek to foster a more respectful and harmonious relationship with the environment, advocating for a worldview that sees the earth as sacred and interconnected with human well-being. This approach also critiques the reductionist, exploitative attitudes of modern industrial societies, which are seen as undermining both spiritual and ecological health. While spiritual ecofeminism has been praised for its emphasis on the sacred nature of the earth and its potential to inspire ecological activism, it has also faced criticism for potentially idealizing pre-modern or indigenous cultures without fully addressing their complexities. Despite these critiques, spiritual ecofeminism remains a powerful framework for integrating spiritual values with environmental and gender justice (Ruether, 1993; Starhawk, 1990). This perspective challenges patriarchal religions that prioritize transcendence over immanence, calling for a more holistic worldview that honors the Earth as a living entity.
4. **Materialist Ecofeminism:** Materialist ecofeminism integrates ecofeminist and materialist perspectives, focusing on how socio-economic and political structures perpetuate the exploitation of both nature and women. It argues that environmental degradation and gender oppression are deeply intertwined with capitalist systems that commodify natural resources and undervalue women's labor, particularly in domestic and caregiving roles. Materialist ecofeminists critique capitalism for treating both the environment and women's bodies as resources for profit, advocating for systemic change that prioritizes ecological sustainability and recognizes the full economic and social contributions of



women. By examining how historical materialism and capitalist structures shape these exploitations, materialist ecofeminism calls for radical economic and social transformations to address the main causes of environmental and gender injustices. Despite its focus on material conditions, it faces criticism for potentially neglecting the cultural and spiritual dimensions of these issues. Karen Warren argues that “environmental degradation disproportionately affects women, particularly in marginalized communities where women are often the primary providers of food, water, and other basic necessities” (Warren 2000). A famous Nigerian climate activist, Adenike Oladosu also states that “women are the first to suffer the consequences of climate change and the last to receive economic gains”. Materialist ecofeminists emphasize the need for concrete policy changes that address these inequalities, such as improving access to clean water and protecting women’s rights to land and resources.

### **Intersectionality in Ecofeminism**

The concept of intersectionality within ecofeminism highlights the interrelation of various forms of oppression, including those based on gender, race, class, and environmental issues. Ecofeminism critiques how patriarchal systems not only exploit nature but also marginalize and oppress women and other vulnerable groups. Intersectionality deepens this critique by revealing how these forms of oppression are not isolated but rather interwoven, often compounding each other in complex ways. For instance, women in the Global South often experience the compounded impacts of environmental degradation, gender discrimination, and economic exploitation more intensely than women in more privileged circumstances. These women may face direct consequences of environmental harm, such as deforestation, water scarcity, or pollution, while simultaneously grappling with gender-based violence and economic inequality. An intersectional approach in ecofeminism acknowledges that their experiences cannot be fully understood or addressed without considering how these different forms of oppression interact (Crenshaw, 1989; Shiva, 2016).

Intersectional ecofeminism also considers how race and class intersect with environmental issues, recognizing that communities of color and low-income groups disproportionately suffer from environmental hazards like toxic waste, pollution, and climate change. This Environmental racism refers to the way systemic inequalities push marginalized communities to suffer the most from environmental harm. Intersectional ecofeminism aims to tackle these inequities by supporting policies that foster both environmental sustainability and social justice. Additionally, it critiques the notion of a singular female experience, highlighting that women's connections to nature and their experiences of oppression differ greatly based on race, class, sexuality, and geographic location. By integrating intersectionality, ecofeminism becomes a more inclusive and effective framework for understanding and combating the complex, interrelated forms of oppression in society (Gaard, 2011; Warren, 2000).

The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) serves as a modern example of intersectional ecofeminist activism. Indigenous women were at the forefront of the protests, focusing on the importance of safeguarding water resources and defending indigenous sovereignty. This activism connects environmental justice with indigenous rights and gender equality, illustrating the intersectional nature of ecofeminist struggles (Estes 2019). “Ecofeminists assert that human emancipation from historical patriarchal attitudes cannot be achieved without the liberation of all ‘othered’ beings.” (Terreblanche 2019)

### **Ecofeminism in the Global Context**

While ecofeminism is often associated with Western feminist thought, it has expanded into a global movement that resonates across diverse cultural contexts. In numerous regions of the global South, ecofeminism addresses the unique challenges faced by women who are intimately connected to their environments due to subsistence agriculture, water collection, and food production. Wangari Maathai’s “Green Belt Movement in Kenya, which mobilized rural women to plant trees and restore degraded environments, is a prime example of how ecofeminist principles can be applied in non-Western contexts to address both ecological and gender issues” (Maathai 2003). Narmada Bachao Andolan started in the 1980s in India to revolt against the manufacture of dams on the Narmada River, which threatened to displace thousands of people, particularly tribal and rural communities.



Women, including activists like Medha Patkar, played a pivotal role in the movement, highlighting the adverse impacts of large-scale development projects on the environment and marginalized communities

In the late 1970s, the Love Canal neighborhood in Niagara Falls, New York, became a focal point of environmental activism after it was revealed that noxious waste buried in the area was causing serious health problems. Lois Gibbs, a local resident, spearheaded the campaign for government intervention, resulting in the relocation of impacted families and the establishment of the Superfund program to address hazardous waste sites. This movement exemplifies grassroots ecofeminism in the U.S., where women led efforts to protect their families and communities from environmental dangers.

In the autonomous region of Rojava, Kurdish women have been instrumental in promoting an ecofeminist approach to governance and community organization. The movement integrates principles of ecological sustainability with gender equality, challenging both patriarchal and capitalist systems. These women-led initiatives focus on sustainable agriculture, water conservation, and the establishment of eco-communes, emphasizing the importance of environmental stewardship in their fight for freedom and self-determination.

The protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock in 2016 were significantly led by indigenous women, who framed their resistance as both an environmental and a feminist struggle. The movement sought to protect water sources from contamination and preserve sacred land, drawing global attention to the intersection of environmental justice, indigenous rights, and gender issues.

The Lenca people, led by environmental activist Berta Cáceres, opposed the manufacture of the Agua Zarca Dam on the Gualcarque River. Berta Cáceres, who was tragically assassinated in 2016, championed the cause of environmental justice and indigenous rights, emphasizing the connection between protecting the environment and defending the rights of indigenous women and communities.

In Senegal, the environmental group Oceanium has collaborated with local women to replant mangrove forests, which are crucial for coastal protection, fisheries, and carbon sequestration. Women play a central part in this movement, as they are often the primary users of these ecosystems for food and fuel. This initiative demonstrates how environmental restoration efforts can empower women and strengthen their communities.

Ecofeminism also intersects with decolonial movements, as indigenous women across the world have been at the forefront of environmental struggles against extractive industries, deforestation, and climate change. Decolonial ecofeminism emphasizes the need to challenge both patriarchal and colonial power structures that exploit natural resources and marginalize indigenous communities. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, an Anishinaabe scholar and activist, argues for a resurgence of indigenous knowledge systems that honor the relationships between people, land, and non-human beings (Simpson 2017). These movements illustrate the global scope of ecofeminism and its diverse applications, as women around the world take action to protect the environment while simultaneously advocating for social and gender justice.

### **Critiques and Challenges of Ecofeminism**

Despite its contributions, ecofeminism has faced several critiques. One major criticism is that some strands of ecofeminism tend to essentialize women by associating them too closely with nature, which can reinforce traditional gender roles. Janet Biehl, for example, argues that cultural ecofeminism's focus on the symbolic connections between women and nature risks perpetuating stereotypes about women's "natural" roles as caretakers (Biehl 1991). Additionally, some scholars have critiqued ecofeminism for being overly focused on Western perspectives. Chandra Talpade Mohanty calls for a more nuanced and intersectional approach that centers the voices of women in the Global South and recognizes the diverse ways in which environmental and gender issues manifest across different cultural contexts (Mohanty 1988). This critique highlights the need for ecofeminism to engage more deeply with decolonial and anti-racist frameworks.

Ecofeminism has also been critiqued for romanticizing aboriginal cultures and simplifying the complex realities of gender and environmental issues in non-Western contexts. Carolyn Merchant's work, for example, examines how the idealization of indigenous knowledge systems can obscure the internal dynamics of gender relations within those systems (Merchant 1980). This critique emphasizes the importance of critical reflexivity within ecofeminist scholarship and activism. Furthermore, ecofeminism's focus on gender and the environment can sometimes overlook other crucial dimensions of power, such as sexuality, disability, and age. A broader



intersectional approach would incorporate these dimensions, ensuring that ecofeminist analysis remains attentive to the diversity of lived experiences.

### **The Future of Ecofeminism**

Ecofeminism remains a vital framework for discernment the intersections of gender and environmental concerns in the 21st century. As the world faces increasingly urgent environmental challenges, ecofeminism offers a critical lens through which to investigate the root causes of these catastrophes and to envision more just and sustainable futures. The movement continues to evolve, incorporating insights from intersectionality, decolonial theory, and environmental justice activism. Moving forward, ecofeminists are calling for systemic changes that address the underlying power structures that perpetuate both gender oppression and environmental degradation. By challenging patriarchal systems and advocating for the rights of both women and the Earth, ecofeminism offers a pathway toward a more equitable and sustainable world. As scholars such as Val Plumwood argue, ecofeminism requires a fundamental rethinking of humanity's relationship with nature, grounded in principles of care, connection, and respect for all life (Plumwood 1993).

### **The Role of Policy and Activism**

To translate ecofeminist theory into practice, there is a growing recognition of the need for policy initiatives that directly address the intersections of gender and the environment. Policies aimed at confronting climate change, preserving biodiversity, and encouraging sustainable development must also address the specific vulnerabilities and contributions of women, particularly those in marginalized communities. "Women are finding solutions for our ailing planet but are not given the platforms they deserve" (UN Women, 2022). Ecofeminist activism continues to play a crucial role in shaping environmental policies at local, national, and international levels. From grassroots movements like the Chipko Movement and the Green Belt Movement to global climate justice campaigns, women-led environmental activism has brought attention to the ways in which environmental degradation disproportionately impacts women and other marginalized groups. These movements not only advocate for environmental protection but also challenge the social and economic inequalities that contribute to ecological destruction.

In recent years, ecofeminist principles have been integrated into broader environmental justice frameworks, which emphasize the requirement for a just transformation to healthy economies. This involves moving away from fossil fuel dependency and extractive industries, which harm both the environment and the communities that rely on it, particularly women in the Global South. The push for climate justice, which calls for accountability from the countries and corporations most responsible for climate change, echoes ecofeminist critiques of the industrialist and paternal systems that fuel environmental degradation.

### **The Future Directions of Ecofeminism**

The future of ecofeminism lies in its potential to adapt to changing cosmic conditions and to address emerging environmental challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. As these challenges intensify, ecofeminism's emphasis on interconnectedness, care, and sustainability becomes even more relevant. Ecofeminism also has the potential to broaden its scope by incorporating other social justice movements, such as disability rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and migrant justice, which are increasingly recognized as linked to environmental issues. One promising direction for ecofeminism is the integration of aboriginal education systems and practices into environmental governance. Aboriginal women have long been at the spearhead of environmental stewardship, drawing on deep cultural understandings of the land and non-human life. Collaborative efforts that honor indigenous sovereignty and incorporate traditional ecological knowledge can enrich ecofeminist approaches to sustainability and conservation.

Additionally, as ecofeminism becomes more intersectional, it is important to ensure that the voices of women from diverse cultural, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds are heard and centered in the movement. This requires not only a commitment to inclusivity within ecofeminist scholarship and activism but also a willingness to critique and challenge the movement's own limitations. In conclusion, ecofeminism is not just about protecting nature or advancing women's rights; it is about reimagining the ways in which we live, work, and relate to one another and the planet. By integrating feminist and ecological perspectives, ecofeminism provides a



powerful framework for addressing the most pressing challenges of our time. The movement's continued relevance lies in its ability to evolve, respond to new challenges, and create a world that values both gender equality and environmental sustainability.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, ecofeminist movements across the globe underscore the powerful connection between environmental sustainability and gender justice. From the Chipko Movement in India to the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, women have been at the front line of efforts to preserve natural resources and resist environmentally destructive practices. These movements reveal how deeply intertwined the struggles for ecological preservation and women's rights are, highlighting the unique role that women play in advocating for a more just and sustainable world. By challenging patriarchal and capitalist systems, ecofeminism offers a holistic approach to addressing both environmental degradation and social inequality. As these global examples demonstrate, the ecofeminist movement is not only about protecting the environment but also about empowering women, safeguarding communities, and ensuring that the voices of the most vulnerable are heard and respected. Through their activism, women have shown that sustainable development and social justice are inseparable, paving the way for a future where both people and the planet can thrive.

In reflecting on the diverse ecofeminist movements worldwide, it becomes clear-cut that ecofeminism is not merely a conceptual framework but a alive reality for countless women who daily confront the dual oppressions of environmental degradation and gender-based inequality. These movements exemplify how localized struggles can catalyze global change, uniting diverse communities under a shared vision of a world where both nature and women are valued and protected. Ecofeminism calls for a reimagining of our relationship with the earth, one that transcends exploitation and domination and instead embraces care, reciprocity, and respect. The movements also challenge mainstream environmentalism to incorporate the voices and experiences of women, especially those from marginalized communities, who often bear the brunt of ecological harm. As ecofeminism evolves, it remains a crucial force in the pursuit of environmental and social justice, reminding us that the planet's health is deeply connected to the well-being of all living beings. As ecofeminism evolves, it remains a crucial force in the pursuit of environmental and social justice, reminding us that the planet's health is deeply connected to the well-being of all living beings.

Future of ecofeminism lies in its ability to inspire and mobilize diverse voices around the world, fostering a global movement that seeks not just to sustain life but to enhance its quality for generations to come.

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