

Towards an Integrative Ecofeminist Praxis

by Tzeporah Berman

Dans l'éthique environnementale ainsi que dans les théories féministes et politiques, l'introduction du terme écoféminisme provoque de vives controverses. Cet article examine les différentes définitions de l'écoféminisme ainsi que son efficacité en tant que théorie.

Ecofeminism reinforces a deep and very personal understanding of the connection between the oppression of women and nature in patriarchal society. Although the term ecofeminism has been used in many ways, its basis is an understanding of the interconnected and mutually reinforcing subjugation of women and the domination of nature. However, the description and explanation for these phenomena, as well as the prescription for change vary considerably. Liberal, socialist, and radical feminism all contribute to an ecofeminist perspective and policy. This article examines these different concepts of ecofeminism. Due to the scope and limitations of the article, it focuses on Western feminist theory and policy, and introduces the contributions of women from around the world in a brief discussion of international policy and the recent United Nations Conference on Environment and Development.

Women's actions are often not explicitly carried out under the banner of 'ecofeminism'. Women's participation in the environmental movement, however, and their recognition of the connections between the oppression of women and the non-human world are, by their very nature, ecofeminist.

Liberal contributions

Liberal feminism stems from the ideology of liberalism which promotes individual freedom and equality (Warren). Liberal feminists explain the oppression of women as the result of a lack of equal rights. Liberal ecofeminists call for equal representation of women in government as well as in non-governmental organizations and scientific research institutions. Liberal ecofeminism seeks redistributive rather than restructural policy changes. Although Canadian policymakers are increasingly sympathetic to

*While men's revolutions have often
been about dying for a cause,
feminist conceived transformation
is about daring to live
for a cause.*

—Petra Kelly

the feminist claim that women should have equal opportunity, they resist fundamental restructuring of power relations (Burt, 192). Liberal feminists and ecofeminists use traditional lobbying techniques to influence legislation and incorporate women fully into the mainstream of contemporary society.

Liberalism focuses on equal access of individuals to resources and opportunities. This is problematic for environmental issues because it is so highly individualistic, and environmental regulations can be seen as limiting to individual freedom. Lib-

eral ecofeminists have argued, however, for environmental regulation and compensation and thus, the implied restriction of individual liberties.

Karen Warren argues, however, that liberalism is inadequate for ecofeminism as it creates inequality through its acceptance of hierarchical frameworks. She further argues that the individualistic nature of liberalism negates the weblike interconnectedness of the human and non-human world—a concept which is central to ecofeminism (10). However, liberal ecofeminism does play an important role in challenging the structure of the state and broadening the environmental agenda.

Socialist ecofeminism

Socialist ecofeminism links the oppression of women and the non-human world to the patriarchal and capitalist systems. Socialist feminism and socialist ecofeminism are about a dramatic restructuring of society rather than the redistributive approach of liberal feminism.

Carolyn Merchant notes that the strength of socialist ecofeminism is a critique of capitalist development in which reproduction and ecology are both subordinate to production (1992, 12).

Ecofeminist actions address the contradiction between production and reproduction. Women attempt to reverse the assaults of production on both biological and social repro-

duction by making problems visible and proposing solutions. When radioactivity from nuclear power-plant accidents, toxic chemicals, and hazardous wastes threaten the biological reproduction of the human species, women experience this contradiction as assaults on their own bodies and on those of their children and act to halt them (Merchant, 1992: 3).

Socialist ecofeminism views both nature and gender as socially and culturally constructed, and critiques the Cartesian or Atomistic world view which fosters such conceptual dichotomies as: masculine/feminine, mind/body, public/private, nature and society (Lahar, 26). Ecofeminist theorists believe that the Cartesian worldview implies an adversarial approach to the non-human world, and perpetuates inequalities in human societies. Furthermore, the isolationism and individualism which is inherent in this world view prevents community organizing for social change, and the creation of egalitarian societies. Essentially it serves as a barrier to a recognition of the interdependence and interrelationships of humans to each other and the non-human world (Lahar). Like socialist feminists, socialist ecofeminists believe that collective action and collective rights are more empowering and more important than individual actions and rights (Adamson *et al.*).

Socialist ecofeminism has emerged recently on an international scale around the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), and has succeeded in recognizing the interdependence between the exploitation of the non-human world, race, class, and gender. In a vision statement written at the "Women, Procreation and Environment" pre-conference, women from around the world called for a fundamental reorganization of patriarchal value systems.

We want to recover our interconnectedness as a relation between human beings that has been transformed into a commodity by modern science, technology and the laws of the market economy... We want to restore the dignity of women and nature which has being [sic] used and abused according to the logic of the market... We want to redefine wealth in an ecological framework, peace in a new meaning of people's security and development in the fulfilment of basic human needs (Corral, 92).

At the World Congress for a Healthy Planet in 1990, 1,500 women from 83 countries drafted the "Global Action for Women Towards Sustainable and Equitable Development" which was presented to UNCED, included in *Agenda 21* and published by the United Nations General Assembly. This document stresses the need to recognize ecological value and to define 'productivity' as that which sustains life. In addition, the document stresses the importance of ensuring women's participation in 'public life' through the elimination of, "constitutional, legal, administrative, cultural, behavioral, social and economic obstacles." Theresa Santa Clara Gomes notes that women's participation is important because,

[W]omen move on realities interfaces, because they inhabit simultaneously the public and the private universes, it is because they experience the margins as places where different realities communicate, that women today are increasingly aware that they represent an unexplored and unprecedented potential in society that the future cannot do without (91).

Socialist ecofeminists feel that women's knowledge can be empowering in breaking down traditional dualistic assumptions which devalue what have traditionally been feminine characteristics: caring, nurturing, friendship, and an interdependence with the non-human world.

In summary, Carolyn Merchant notes that the goal of socialist ecofeminism is to develop sustainable, non-dominating relations with nature and create an "egalitarian socialist state, in addition to resocializing men and women into nonsexist, nonracist, non-violent, anti-imperialist forms of life" (1990, 105).

Radical and 'nature' ecofeminism

Within the ecofeminist literature much confusion exists over the differences between radical, cultural, and 'nature' ecofeminists. Radical ecofeminism can be divided into two categories: the 'nature' ecofeminists who believe that women have a biological and spiritual link with the non-human world and are therefore 'closer to nature' than men, and radical ecofeminists who believe that women's oppression is rooted in women's reproductive roles and the sex/gender system.

Radical feminists believe that,

[P]atriarchy oppresses women in sex-specific ways by defining women as beings whose primary functions are either to bear and raise children (i.e. to be mothers) or to satisfy male sexual desires (i.e., to be sex objects) (Warren, 1987: 14).

For radical ecofeminists, the liberation of both women and the non-human world lies in the dismantling of patriarchal systems and the end of male control over women's bodies and the earth. Radical ecofeminists focus on revaluing characteristics which have traditionally been associated with women and nature. The basis of this is that the cultural devaluation of natural processes within patriarchal society is a manifestation of masculine consciousness (Diamond and Orenstein, ix). By recognizing the value of the non-human world and revaluing women's culture and practices, radical ecofeminists believe that it is possible to break down the dualistic assumptions from which gender categories (not sex categories) are created. Traditionally, women have been associated with nature—they are seen to have a biological link with the natural world. This association creates gender stereotypes that to be feminine is to be passive and intuitive, and to be masculine is to be strong, unemotional and rational (Jagger). These gender roles have been socially and culturally constructed over time to value the 'masculine' side, and the feminine/nature category is less coveted. Radical ecofeminists, like socialist ecofeminists, believe that these dualistic assumptions must be

broken down. However, radical ecofeminists believe that this can be done through embracing that which has been devalued.

Nature ecofeminists embrace women's association with nature as a source of womanly power. Many nature ecofeminists celebrate ancient Goddess worship and rituals around the female menstrual and lunar cycles. They seek to develop a women-centred culture and alternative institutions. Many ecofeminist and feminist theorists find this essentialist women/nature connection degrading, as well as detrimental to social change. They argue that the domination of women and nature stems from the dualism which biological determinism reinforces. A replacement of the patriarchy with a similarly hierarchical matriarchy would do little to solve the problems.

Both radical and nature ecofeminism explore the connection between women's spiritual/mystical and intuitive experiences and their relationship with the non-human world. This is apparent in actions which challenge the values of male culture through direct action—often symbolic and essential to the reformulation of environmental issues. Ynestra King recounts one very powerful event:

In England on December 12, 1982, thirty thousand women surrounded a U.S. military installation, weaving into the fence baby clothes, scarves, poems and other personal-life symbols...The politics embodied by these actions draw on women's culture: embodying what is best in women's socialization...[and] seeking an integration of issues (1990, 26).

Radical and nature ecofeminism promote an ethics of care, compassion, and personal accountability. This has been important in broadening the agenda of environmental organizations.

Towards an integrative ecofeminist praxis

The full implications of an ecofeminist praxis are impossible to delineate as ecofeminism is still emerging around the world. This article does not provide a map of what ecofeminism should be, or what an ecofeminist policy would be; it is a celebration of the diverse ways that it is being explored and acted upon. Ecofeminist theory creates progressive dialogue which plays an important role in broadening the policy agenda of non-governmental and government institutions, reframes environmental issues to recognize gender implications, and questions the structure of the decision making body.

Critics of ecofeminism believe that the ecofeminist movement could be forcing women back into traditional gender stereotypes. Even though they are moving into the public sphere, women are still 'cleaning up'. Recognizing this danger, however, does not negate the importance of having women's voices heard on these issues. Without women's participation in the environmental movement many issues and solutions will continue to be defined within a patriarchal framework.

It is essential for feminist theory and practice to include an ecological perspective and conversely, for solutions to ecological problems to include a feminist perspective (Warren, 5).

Ecofeminism brings a recognition to policy development that our relationships with each other are reflected in our relationships with the non-human world. We cannot separate our politics from that which sustains us, and that to which we are connected through our mind, body and spirit.

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WOMEN'S ACTION AGENDA 21

Preamble: Toward a Healthy Planet

People everywhere are frightened by mounting evidence of the deterioration of Earth's lifegiving systems. Human beings are part of the web of life, not above its laws. We have a special responsibility to respect all of the Earth community, including our air, water, soil and natural resources, our fauna and flora, and the atmosphere that shelters us.

We, women of many nations, cultures and creeds, of different colors and classes, have come together to voice our concern for the health of our living planet and all its interdependent life forms.

As caring women, we speak on behalf of those who could not be with us, the millions of women who experience daily the violence of environmental degradation, poverty, and exploitation of their work and bodies. As long as Nature and women are abused by so-called "free market" ideology and wrong concepts of "economic growth," there can be no environmental security. Rainforest dwellers, island peoples, and inhabitants of fragile arid zones are threatened with displacement and dispossession due to human disruption and pollution of vulnerable ecosystems. In a world that condones such practices, there lies little hope for long-term survival or peace among peoples.

We are deeply troubled by the increasing quality of life disparities between inhabitants of industrialized nations and those so-called "developing" nations and by the growing numbers of poor within the rich countries. In all instances, women, children, minorities, and indigenous people are the chief victims.

We are outraged by the inequities among children the world over, with millions denied food, shelter, health care, education and opportunities for a full and productive life. We condemn the racism and disrespect of diversity on which this inequity feeds.

We equate lack of political and individual will among world leaders with a lack of basic morality and spiritual values and an absence of responsibility towards future generations.

We will no longer tolerate the enormous role played by military establishments and industries in making the 20th century the bloodiest and most violent in all of human history. Militarism is impoverishing and maiming both the Earth and humanity. It is urgent that resources currently consumed by the military be redirected to meet the needs of people and our planet.

We believe that a healthy and sustainable environment is contingent upon world peace, respect for human rights, participatory democracy, the self-determination of peoples, respect for indigenous people and their lands, cultures, and traditions, and freedom of information.

We come together to pledge our commitment to the empowerment of women, the central and powerful force in the search for equity between and among the peoples of the Earth and for a balance between them and the life-support systems that sustain us all.

Women are a powerful force for change. In the past two decades, thousands of new women groups have been organized in every region of the world, ranging from community-based groups to international networks. Everywhere, women are catalysts and initiators of environmental activism. Yet policy-makers continue to ignore the centrality of women's roles and needs as they make Fate of the Earth decisions.

We demand our right, as half the world's population, to bring our perspectives, values, skills and experiences into policy-making, on an equal basis with men, not only at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in June 1992 but on into the 21st century.

We pledge to undertake our Action Agenda 21 on behalf of ourselves, our families, and future generations. We appeal to all women and men to join in this call for profound and immediate transformation in human values and activities.

The World Women's Congress Action Agenda is a compilation of the work, ideas, and values of 1500 women from around the world, North and South, East and West. It is meant as a challenge to women and men to work together to create a safe and sustainable future.