



THE ROLE OF ECO FEMINISM IN GRASSROOTS ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS

Pawni Sachan

Student of Political Science

Galgotias university

Dr Devika Sharma

Associate Professor,

Department of Political Science, Galgotias University

pawnisachan27@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

" The Role of Eco Feminism in Grassroots Environmental Movements" explores the deep interconnection between ecological sustainability and gender justice through the lens of ecofeminism. The paper critically investigates how ecofeminism—which links the domination of women and the exploitation of nature—has become a guiding ideology in many grassroots environmental movements. Through global and Indian case studies such as the Chipko Movement, Green Belt Movement, and Standing Rock protests, this research illustrates the unique contribution of women as ecological stewards and frontline activists. Drawing from intersectional and decolonial ecofeminist thought, it shows how these movements resist both patriarchal and capitalist structures and foster inclusive, sustainable environmental governance.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, grassroots environmentalism, gender and nature, environmental justice, women’s leadership

INTRODUCTION

Climate change, environmental degradation, deforestation, and biodiversity loss have become one of the most burning global issues of the 21 st century. All these interlinked issues not only pose dangerous risks to the ecological balance of the planet but also to the social and economic welfare of the vulnerable population. To these increasing environmental menaces, grassroots environmental movements have picked up in different regions especially in the Global South. How these movements form is partially dependent on the fact that they grow out of communities whose lives and livelihoods are dependent upon the health of the local ecosystems. It is remarkable that such wave of resistance has been led by women and in particular representing disadvantaged and



indigenous groups of people due to their close connection to nature, their traditional knowledge, their role as main caregivers and resource managers.

It is on the background of this that ecofeminism has taken root as an attractive theory and activist approach which has criticized the simultaneous oppression of women and nature. Invented by radical communist Françoise d'Eaubonne in the 1970s, the term ecofeminism presents a broad thought process that questions the system of patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism, which both exploit and oppress women and the environment at the same time. With ecofeminism the domination of nature and the domination of women are structurally overlapping due to a hierarchic, dualistic worldview that favors male, human-centered, exploitative paradigm at the expense of cooperative, life-affirmative ones. It is an attempt to unite environmental ethics and gender justice in order to conceive a more comprehensive, sustainable and more just future.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the nature by which ecofeminist ideologies are spoken, exercised, and lived through the grassroots environmental movements. It examines the thought behind ecofeminism in philosophy as well as the practical application of this thought in various sociocultural settings. The study points at the role of women, as bearers of ecological knowledge, spiritual leaders, and political actors in localized environmental resistance and concurrent challenge to deep-seated systems of gender-based oppression.

To this goal, this paper is organized according to some principal themes, including the introduction of the main ideals of the ecofeminist theory, the analysis of reasoned criticism of patriarchal capitalism and neoliberal models of development, the specialized role of women in the movement of environmental activism, and case studies exemplifying the existing ideals of ecofeminism. Ranging across Chipko Movement in India, the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, and Indigenous land protection movements in North and Latin America, the paper explores ways in which grassroots ecofeminist struggles led to a protection of the ecosystem as well as the ability to reinvent socio-political terrain.

In this case, by placing ecofeminism in the context of grassroots environmentalism, the paper presented tries to contribute to a better understanding of the interrelation of gender and ecology in resistance movements. It maintains that ecofeminist action can offer crucial avenues to climate justice, sustainable growth, and community survival when facing the environmental collapse.

1. ECOFEMINISM: THEORETICAL GROUNDING

Ecofeminism represents a significant philosophical and activist movement that gained prominence in the late twentieth century, particularly as a critical response to the intertwined issues of patriarchy and ecological degradation. The movement serves as a framework for analyzing the parallels between the oppression of women and the exploitation of the environment. The term “ecofeminism” was first introduced by French feminist Françoise d’Eaubonne in her 1974 work, *Le Féminisme ou la Mort**. Following its introduction, ecofeminism quickly proliferated, influencing both scholarly discourse and grassroots activism on a global scale.

Central to ecofeminist thought is the rejection of binary dualisms—such as man/woman, culture/nature, reason/emotion, and mind/body—that have long underpinned Western



philosophical, scientific, and social structures. These dualistic constructs have historically been mobilized to assert the superiority of men, culture, and rationality over women, nature, and emotion. Ecofeminism critiques the ideological foundations of these binaries, contending that patriarchal worldviews have justified both the marginalization of women and the exploitation of the natural world.

A notable strength of ecofeminism is its theoretical diversity. Over time, multiple schools of ecofeminist thought have emerged, each offering distinct perspectives and contributions to the broader discourse. This multiplicity underscores the intellectual richness and adaptability of the movement.

- a) **Cultural Ecofeminism:** This strand underlines the spiritual, emotional and biological relations between women and nature. The nurturance, the intuition, the empathy of women are some attributes that are famous among the cultural ecofeminists, and which they consider the key to balancing out the ecological problem. Although this school of thought shares the ideas of goddess spirituality and patriarchal religions, this school has been criticized as essentializing female identity and promoting gender stereotypes.
- b) **Materialist Ecofeminism:** The materialist ecofeminism inspired by Marxist and socialist concerns moves away the emphasis of the symbolic representations to material conditions. It criticizes the economical capitalism models of commoditizing nature and labor-i.e., the unpaid or underpaid labor of women in subsistence agriculture, domestic work and taking care of society. Leading academic activists such as Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies believe that women, at least in the Global South, possess indigenous knowledges systems essential to sustainable development but are ignored by corporate globalization, and systematic devaluation of scientific knowledge through scientific reductionism.
- c) **Intersectional Ecofeminism:** In elective affinities with the earlier mode of Black and postcolonial feminisms, such a move entails integrating race, caste, class, and indigeneity in the ecofeminist critique. Intersectional ecofeminism acknowledges that women do not all suffer the effects of environmental degradation equally or suffer gender inequality in the same way.

To use but one example, Dalit women in India, Afro-descendant women in Latin America, and Indigenous women in North America all encounter different arrangements of ecological and social outsider-ness. Intersectional ecofeminists claim that a more context-sensitive and responsible concept of environmental justice is needed, not that of universalizing women experience and the narrowing of dominant ecofeminism committed to the empowerment of women.

2. GRASSROOTS ENVIRONMENTALISM AND GENDERED RESISTANCE

The grassroots environmental movements are the movements of the local people to preserve the land, water, forests and livelihoods of the people where they live and work against the ecological destruction. Such movements tend to be decentralized, participatory, and grounded on experiences.



The role of women, especially those belonging to the rural and indigenous communities, is disproportionately active in this resistance because in rural and indigenous settings, women are closely linked with their land and to environmental impacts than their urban counterparts.

The roles of women are conditioned by their everyday duties so that women get involved in collecting water, producing food, saving seeds, and developing traditional ecological knowledge. This makes them not just custodians of their homes but also biodiversity and sustainability.

There are some important themes that characterize the gendered character of the grassroots environmental resistance:

- a) **Resilience and Ecological Knowledge:** At the community level, there is the acquisition of practical knowledge on the level of biodiversity and climate patterns by the women themselves, and this knowledge is vital when it comes to adaptive and sustainable practices.
- b) **Spiritual and Cultural affiliation to Lan:** Most women present environmental protection as a moral and religious issue, and they connect the idea with the history of ancestors and indigenous cosmologies in which nature is regarded a sacred place.
- c) **Opposition of Exploitation Development:** The grass root movements tend to resist projects sanctioned by the state and corporations- in terms of mining, dams or industrial agriculture, which either displaces residents and destroys the ecosystems. Women rebel against these models and seek inclusion and locally based alternatives.

In short, women involved in grassroots environmentalism by leading them represent ecofeminism values of interconnection, care, justice, and resistance, which makes them major contributors to the world ecological and social sustainability movement.

3. CASE STUDIES: ECOFEMINISM IN ACTION

3.1 Chipko Movement (India)

One of the landmark examples of ecofeminist activism is the Chipko Movement which was started as early as 1973 in Uttarakhand. This protest led by Gaura Devi and other women in the rural areas was carried out by embracing trees, an act to stop commercial logging. Their opposition were based on ecological defense as well as livelihood defense, which signify the values of care, sustainability, and non-violence, which are the vital characteristics of ecofeminism.

3.2 Green Belt Movement (Kenya)

Initiated by Wangari Maathai in 1977, Green Belt Movement was the movement that attempted to oppose deforestation by means of participatory tree planting. It gave thousands of women in Kenya power through connecting the environmental healing with financial independence and participation in the society. The activity demonstrated that grassroots environmentalism could be perceived as a platform of gender empowerment as well as the democratic process.



3.3 Protest in Standing Rock Sioux (USA)

The protest of the Standing Rock against Dakota Access Pipeline was organized by aboriginal women protecting their groundwater and sacred territories. The ecofeminist theme of protecting nature as an alive and sacred object were reflected in the slogan: water is life. Their leadership placed Indigenous rights to environmental justice, gendered resistance on the global map.

3.4 The Navdanya (India)

Various women centric movements such as Navdanya by Vandana Shiva aim to propagate organic farming and seed sovereignty. Navdanya is an example of materialist ecofeminism as they are training rural women in agroecological skills and stand up against privatization of agriculture by corporations. It gives women back their power over food systems and biological diversity by acting sustainably and located in communities.

4. CHALLENGES TO ECOFEMINIST MOVEMENTS

Ecofeminist movements, while notable for their philosophical depth and grassroots impact, still hit a wall when it comes to mainstream recognition and support. The obstacles? They're rooted in stubborn patriarchal systems, political pushback, and broader social exclusion. Let's lay it out:

- a) **Marginalized from Decision-Making:** Despite being the driving force at the community level, women are regularly sidelined when it's time to make policy or set environmental agendas. Their perspectives remain underrepresented in institutions that control critical resources—think land, funding, and participation in global climate forums.
- b) **Violence and Harassment:** Defending the environment isn't just tough—it's dangerous. Women environmental defenders, especially those challenging powerful business or state interests, often face threats, intimidation, and sometimes even violence. In many parts of the world, legal protections are flimsy at best.
- c) **Dismissal in Mainstream Circles:** Ecofeminist ideas are frequently brushed aside as emotional or unscientific. This bias means their ways of knowing and acting—centered on holistic, community-based practices—get undervalued by mainstream environmentalists who tend to favor technical or economic solutions.
- d) **Cultural and Social Restrictions:** In societies where traditional norms still dominate, women's public roles and leadership get restricted. These barriers limit their ability to organize, advocate, or even access resources needed for activism.
- e) **Lack of Funding:** Particularly in the Global South, ecofeminist groups often operate with little to no financial support. Without steady resources or institutional backing, scaling up or sustaining their work becomes a real challenge.



Still, ecofeminist movements show remarkable resilience. They rely on strong community ties, intergenerational learning, and activism grounded in local culture. Approaches like storytelling, spiritual ecology, and participatory governance offer inclusive, sustainable alternatives that challenge both environmental harm and gender inequity. Ultimately, their continued advocacy makes it clear: environmental justice and gender justice are inseparable.

5. STRATEGIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To genuinely advance ecofeminist movements and strengthen their impact on environmental justice, a comprehensive, layered approach is required—one that centers women’s knowledge, rights, and leadership at all levels of ecological governance. The following strategies are particularly significant:

- a) **Legal Recognition of Women’s Land and Resource Rights:** Ensuring that women have formal, enforceable rights to land, water, and other resources is foundational. This calls for legal reforms that guarantee women’s access, inheritance, and control, empowering them to make autonomous decisions and manage resources sustainably.
- b) **Integration of Local and Indigenous Ecological Knowledge into Policy:** Women—especially those in grassroots and Indigenous communities—possess generational ecological expertise regarding biodiversity, soil health, and sustainable land practices. Recognizing and incorporating this knowledge into conservation policy and education creates more grounded and culturally relevant approaches to environmental challenges.
- c) **Women’s Leadership in Environmental Governance:** Meaningful participation of women in environmental institutions is essential. This includes establishing pathways for leadership, such as capacity-building, quota-based representation, and dismantling socio-cultural barriers that limit women’s engagement. Women’s active leadership tends to yield more equitable and community-centered outcomes.
- d) **Strengthening Global Ecofeminist Solidarity Networks:** Building alliances among ecofeminist groups worldwide facilitates the sharing of best practices, mobilizes international advocacy, and places pressure on global forums (such as the UNFCCC and SDGs) to prioritize gender-inclusive environmental justice. Such networks also amplify local struggles and demand on the international stage.
- e) **Financial and Institutional Support for Grassroots Women’s Movements:** Many ecofeminist initiatives face chronic underfunding and lack institutional support. Governments, NGOs, and international organizations should prioritize direct investment in women-led environmental projects, providing access to grants, training, and the necessary infrastructure for sustained impact.

Implementing these strategies can empower ecofeminist movements to challenge patriarchal and exploitative structures. By prioritizing women’s rights, knowledge, and leadership, ecofeminist



activism can drive the creation of more inclusive, resilient, and ecologically sustainable futures for both communities and ecosystems.

CONCLUSION

Ecofeminism, far from being merely theoretical, manifests as a lived reality, grounded in the everyday actions and resistance of women worldwide. It critiques the intertwined forces of patriarchy and capitalism—systems that commodify both nature and women’s bodies—while also offering a forward-thinking vision for ecological harmony, social justice, and collective well-being. Movements such as Chipko, the Green Belt Movement, Standing Rock, and Navdanya illustrate how women have mobilized at the grassroots level, historically and in contemporary contexts, to safeguard both ecosystems and communities. These cases exemplify ecofeminist values: care, reciprocity, and respect for all forms of life. Despite persistent barriers—systemic exclusion, threats of violence, and lack of institutional acknowledgment—ecofeminist initiatives endure, sustained by community solidarity, spiritual engagement, and valuing alternative forms of knowledge. This research underscores the inseparability of sustainable development from gender equity and ecological justice. As environmental crises intensify, the insights and leadership provided by ecofeminist activism become increasingly vital. Through advocacy for land rights, incorporation of traditional ecological knowledge, and calls for inclusive decision-making, ecofeminism articulates transformative responses to the urgent environmental and social challenges of our time.

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Pawni Sachan
Dr Devika Sharma
