

Women and Environmental Discourse

J. Viplav Babu

Department of Political Science, Osmania University, Hyderabad, India



ABSTRACT

It is admitted with much regret that the whole discourse of environmentalism pays very little or no attention to women's contribution, which the policy makers continue to forget and ignore the centrality of women's role and needs. However, women act as catalysts and initiators of environmental activism a well-known reality. The negative interpretation of women and nature that having strong and profound historical cultural and physical links, throughout the world by the male-dominated culture. Historical and ideological suppression of women and of nature are linked to the extent that they deny the remarkable role that women play in environmental protection by a culture of silence and negligence. Ecofeminism assumed an intimate relation between women and environment. Patriarchy is the single responsible reason for the domination of both women and nature. This repressive and domineering conceptual framework of Patriarchy can be abolished by the joint efforts of feminists and environmentalists, as they share the same goal. However, in the arena of global environmental politics women's voice has been snubbed as it is being seldom heard. Thus, women are both victim and actors of environmental concern. Furthermore, it is also imperative to consider that women are not only susceptible to environmental restoration but are also valuable agent of change for mitigation and adaptation efforts to climate change. It is in these marginalized and subaltern sections of the society that have the capabilities to draw sustenance for themselves and their families. The corollary to the destruction of nature equals destruction of women as a source for 'Staying alive'. This paper demonstrates that the association of women with nature and repression of both belong to the identical conceptual framework.

Keywords: Great chain, dichotomizes, Eco-feminist, Ariel Salleh.

Citation: Citation: J. Viplav Babu (2022). Women and Environmental Discourse. Journal of Diversity Studies. v1i2. 21-25.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7902383>

Corresponding Author: J. Viplav Babu

Article History: Received on: September 25, 2022 | Revised on: November 20, 2022 | Accepted on: December 29, 2022

Copyright: © 2022 by the authors. The license of Journal of Diversity Studies. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (www.diversity.researchfloor.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

E-mail Address: viplavj@ymail.com

INTRODUCTION

The paper divided into three parts, with first part of it focuses on the conceptual framework on environment that is dominated by Patriarchy. The Second part of the paper would disclose- how women act as a victim and as an actor in the environmental discourse. The last part of the paper examines how there had been relational neglect of women's experience and concern in the institutional arena of environmental governance. The paper also reveals the need to recognize gender sensitive strategies to respond to some of the crucial environmental problems relating to conservation and protection strategies. The paper further explores the right position of women in the environmental discourse and suggests innovation of conceptual framework and practical intervention.

I. Women and Environmental Activism

The patriarchal or the male-dominated cultures have not only viewed but also interpreted negatively the intense and deep historical, cultural and physical links between the nature and women, thereby denying the right place of women as catalysts and initiators of environmental activism. This suppression of

both women and nature is deep rooted having historical and ideological links to patriarchy. The male-dominated cultures have denied women their remarkable role in environmental protection by a culture of silence and negligence. In these repressive conditions, Ecofeminism has evolved to identify the single responsible reason for the domination of women and of the nature is patriarchy and believed that there is a close link between women and environment. Therefore, it can be said that feminists and environmentalists share identical goal of abolishing the domineering conceptual framework [1-2], while criticizing rationalism, which perpetuates dualism of inferior and superior being of things, as the primary responsible reason for the oppression of women and of nature. The stand of rationality is the stand between reason and emotions, mind & body, human & nature and between man and women; and it is the former, which always take priority over the other. Thus, rationalism takes the shape of dualism, making a unique ground for assessing superior and inferior thing [3] therefore, challenging rationalism, which fosters dualism leading to domination of nature by human and women by man, is the need of the hour. [4], famous feminist theologian and critique of western dualistic philosophy has emphasized that

such rationalistic approach, which dichotomizes relationships, has generated a strong hierarchical structure that is reflected in policy matters and practices of social institutions. The dichotomy created has resulted in a relationship where man is the subject with defined purpose and women is the object, who is not defined; and due to this notion women's perspectives and outlook is seldom heard or culturally incorporated. Women's contribution in the field of environment has been comfortably silenced as we live in a culture of silence where vulnerable section of society viz., women has been oppressed. However, Ruether asserted that women's nature and the liberation of society go hand in hand. Engel stressed on one of the essential imperative to the issue is to do away with "pervasive dualism" [5]. Pervasive dualism impels most of us to think, women as such has no defined purpose and they are always defined in association with the male member of society which further increases the divergence among the two.

According to theologians Rosemary Ruether and Elizabeth Dobson Gray, who discussed about patriarchal hierarchy, wherein they stated that hierarchy, which is a creation of patriarchal belief system, justifies the oppression of nature by human and silencing of women by man as an accepted norm of the society. As per these theologians the hierarchy that is set-up is, 'Great chain of being with God or Allah at the top, next man, the steward of nature, than women, children, animal and finally plants and rocks at the base'. A profound segregation among the categories of man and women which upholds the division of 'reality' into the 'truly human' and the 'simply natural'.

Women by nature are close to nature and represent the traits of nature qualitatively by imbibing the logic of reciprocity rather than mastery and control of nature. Thus, women's relationship with nature organized around this logic of reciprocity [6]. As [7], puts it, "women are not owners of their own bodies or of the earth, but they cooperate with their bodies and with the earth in order to let grow and to make grow" [8]. The famous sub-continent Eco-feminist Vandana Shiva argues that the culture of violence against nature and against women as in-built in the very form of perceiving both without much questioning. She further points out that violence against nature is the consequence of colonial imposition which leaves us no option but to adopt the prevailing industrial or developmental model. Shiva proclaims, with the embracing of this model of development, there came a drastic theoretical change that shifted away from the Indian cosmological view (animate and inanimate) of nature as Prakriti, as "activity and diversity" and as "an expression of Shakti, the feminine and creative principle of the cosmos" which "in conjunction with the masculine principle (Purusha) creates the world". The shift had completely changed the relationship between man and nature from the living and nurturing relation to that of dominating over static and passive nature. The dynamics between man and nature shifted away from conceptualizing nature as mother earth to exploit earth. "Viewed from the perspective of nature, or women embedded in nature," the transfer was exploitive and brutal "For women...the death of Prakriti is simultaneously a beginning of their marginalization, devaluation, displacement and ultimate dispensability. The ecological crisis is, at its root, the death of the feminine principle...." [9].

V. Shiva went on to argue that violence against nature in general and women in particular linked both ideological and materially. She put forward this point with an illustration that, "Third world women are dependent on nature for drawing sustenance for themselves, their families, their societies". Thus, the relationship between nature and women is

invariably proportion that is destruction of nature becomes the destruction of women's source for "Staying Alive" [10]. Shiva who worked along with women activists in the famous Chipko Movement (the environmental movement for forest protection and regeneration in the Garhwal hills of northwest India) gave her a firsthand experience of ground realities. She makes a strong argument that, "Third world women' have also a special knowledge of nature" (ibid). However, in the entire discourse of women and environment, Sherry Ortner in the field of contemporary feminist discourse introduced the idea that women are seen as closer to nature.

II. Environmental Discourse: Women as victim and agent of change

Climate change has further brought more sufferings to women as they are more vulnerable than man for the simple reason that they constitute the majority of world's poor and are more dependent for their survival and livelihood on natural resources. In the rural areas of developing and under-developed countries where the dependency on local natural resources for their survival and livelihood is high, are especially vulnerable effecting both men and women. Nevertheless, it is vital to consider that women are more susceptible to environmental cures and are valuable actors or agents of change in terms of mitigation and adaptation to tackle the present environmental deterioration. Women have strong network of knowledge and expertise and their experience will be productive in forming strategies and policies for climate change mitigation, disaster reduction and adaptation. Women and girls in developing and under-developed nations are the source of sustenance for themselves and their families as they experience the burden of fetching water from distant sources for their families and in this sense, they are responsible for drawing sustenance. In this scenario, destruction of nature becomes destruction of women as source of "staying alive" [11]. Not only this, women face increased risks of sexual harassment while searching farther afield for resources and carrying heavy loads long distances, due to environmental deterioration.

The destruction of the environment obviously poses the major risk to marginalized cultures and occupations like that of tribes, nomads, fisher-folk and artisans, as these cultures largely dependent on instantaneous environment for livelihood and survival, as well. In this whole gamut of things, women bear the maximum impact of the destruction of biomass sources. Women, especially from poor landless, marginal or small farming families who inherit rural cultures are affected the most. Viewed from the perspective of these women, it can be conclusively argued that the present developmental models are largely ignorant of women's needs and are designed habitually anti-women to increase their work burden [12].

The drifting costs of environmental factors effect in elevated death rates for women in least developed countries as it has a direct connection to their socioeconomic status, to behavioural restrictions and poor access to information. It is notable that even in the labour market women have systematic disadvantage positions. Because of this, women have limited employment opportunities, lesser occupational mobility, minimum or no level of training and paid less for the same or similar work. One of the major reasons for vulnerability of women is the gender discrepancy. This gender difference was clearly visible in the a variety of major disasters viz., the Asian Tsunami, Hurricanes in North America and other storms in Atlantic America, European heat waves and Cyclones in South Asia etc. Women faces increased risk and vulnerability level

heightened in the circumstance of cyclones, floods and other disasters that need mobility, cultural constrictions on women's movement delay their timely get away, access to shelter or access to health care. Therefore, it is of prime importance that we arrive at gender sensitive strategies for countering human security wants and environmental and humanitarian crisis caused by climate change. Shiva argues that women should not be viewed not just as victims of environmental degradation but also as constructive mechanism in building 'Voice of liberation and transformation'. Women's expertise in management of natural resources can make huge contribution for sustainable development [13]. The role, women play in sustainable development occurs because of their expertise in handling minimum resources to the maximum benefit and as a result of their very nature of women-ness. It is because of women's reproductive and nurturing role that makes them closer to nature than man. Thus, based on their expertise in understanding and their experiential knowledge offer an extraordinary perspective on the process of regeneration of environment that one needs to consider alternative approaches to development [14].

The vital role that women play by leading ecology movements in the Third world is globally recognized. The Greenbelt Movement in Kenya started by the National Council of Women in 1977, led by Wangari Maathai is a world-renowned movement mobilized by grassroots. And in a much similar way, the Chipko movement in North India that opposed the logging of forest causing forest destruction led by Gauri Devi with many other women of Reni village in Uttarakhand was also a grassroots movement that played a significant role in spreading concern for environment. The growing resistance to ecological destruction in the last few decades, women played and are still playing active role in most of these protests in India. Women in India are the epicentre of voice for environmental concern whether caused by direct deforestation like the Chipko in Himalayan foothills and the Appiko movement in Western Ghats of Karnataka protested through non-violent means have successfully resisted the environmental destruction. Further, the large irrigation and hydroelectric project in Narmada valley of central India, the Koel Karo in Bihar, Silent Valley Project in Kerala were some of the successful movements led by women. These projects were shelved through central government intervention, which were engulfed by local protests. The Ichchamalli and Bhopalpatnam construction of dams in Andhra Pradesh was protested by 5,000 tribal people with women as leading members of the protest in 1984 and the contentious Tehri dam in Garwal. Thus, women's role in these ecological movements is immense and their contribution for environmental restoration efforts is lauded by the whole world [15].

There were many other illustrations of women working jointly to defend and mend the environment. The examples drawn here are from women's environment and development projects, which were presented as success stories at the Partners in Life Conference in Miami in 1991. Women have laboured to fight soil erosion in Ghana, to spotlight on pollution control on lake Maruit in Egypt and to oppose toxic waste dumping in the Bay of Bengal in Bangladesh [16].

III. Women's position in environmental discourse

In the last four decades, environmental concern has become a critical issue that the international community is grappling with. Nevertheless, in the whole discourse of environmentalism, there is no attention or very little attention is paid to women's unique relationship with the environment. This part of the paper examines how there had been relational neglect of women's concern and views on environmental degradation

and how women's experience and expertise never entered the institutional arena of environmental governance.

Women's skill and expertise in handling environmental disasters is undervalued. It is often seen at the international decision-making level that very few women are in that position. The absence of women in decision-making is clearly visible, as the decisions taken simply do not reflect the perspectives, views and needs of women. From the above discussion, it can be gathered that women are catalysts and initiators of environmental activism but the policy makers seem to continue to ignore the centrality of women's role and needs [17]. International agencies and domestic governments have repeatedly ignored the significant part that women played in caring the environment as managers and conservers of natural resources. "Their voice, like their knowledge and experience is simply not heard" [18].

In some parts of the world for example in Africa, women produce 80% of the food and on India about 60% of the farmers are women. Jacobson is of the view that 'in designing or carrying out development programmes women are rarely involved' [5]. She observed that largely agricultural extension workers in Africa are men and most of the farmers are women, a pattern which is observed in most parts of the world [2] and that forestry management programmes rarely include women or consider women's experiences despite their 'prominent role as users and managers' of forest resources (Ibid, p.38). Therefore, these programmes are likely to fail for this very reason as they do not address women's needs nor consider their experience. Furthermore, the vital part women play in Third world agriculture to be seen as noteworthy, given the grave constrictions that they usually face [7]. Due to this exclusion of women 'innumerable programmes to overturn deforestation have miserably failed as the policy makers did not construct village from women's experience as primary managers and harvesters of forest products in their communities [9]. In pursuit of sustainable development, participation of women is not only beneficial to women but to whole humanity and it becomes imperative to incorporate their vital experience and knowledge. Ariel Salleh emphasized the idea that women could add to the negotiations of environmental sustainability 'the truth of an ethic of care'. Hitherto their 'different voice' is seldom heard. [11] points out to this disappointing fact by drawing our attention towards world commission on Environment and Development and women's participation in it. The most important thrust in the report of the world commission on environment and development, "Our Common Future", is the concept of sustainable development. The WCED report suggests that unless we make ecologically sustainable development in all countries, the future will be bleak for survival and there will be no future. One of the striking features of this commission is that, women led it; two others of its members were women, one woman for every six men. Despite having had women's membership in its formation, the report omits any discussion of the potential within women's culture to provide practical and philosophical guidelines for sustainable development. This act of excluding women from the scheme of the things will only omit the energy, creativity and traditions of half of humanity at a time when we need to mobilize all available human resources to pave a new way towards sustainable common future. The humanity should not ignore women's experiences of handling environmental degradation and ecosystem management as they have particular knowledge and expertise to pursue sustainable development.

At the international institutional arena of environmental governance, it is clearly visible that women's concerns and

their expertise about environmental degradation are all poorly represented. Gendered nature of environmental degradation and environmental governance started getting attention in official circles in the late 1980s [14]. The Stockholm conference, the first summit on environmental protection, has discussed neither the role of women in environmental governance nor the impact of environmental degradation on women. Indeed the Stockholm conference not only ignored women's role but the language used was also highly gendered. It was only in 1986, and that too within the UN system the UNEP has acknowledged and responded to the linkage between environmental degradation and women's lives. In 1986, UNEP established a committee of Senior Women Advisors on Sustainable Development (SWAGSD). In November 1991, UNEP convened Global Assembly on women and Environment (the Partners in life conference) and UNEP sponsored four regional assemblies on women and the environment as part of its programmatic response to the Forward Looking Strategies (FLS), adopted, at the 1985 Nairobi Conference to review the UN Decade for women. Though the Forward Looking Strategies report did note that 'environmental degradation is a contributing factor to the deplorable conditions endured by many women (UNICE/UNFPA 1991), nevertheless the link between women and environment had not been a major theme at the Nairobi Conference [16].

Even the Brundtland Report, though very comprehensive and progressive in many ways emphasizing on social justice as a fundamental theme of sustainable development utterly failed to develop any time to women on gender concern at all. Even during the early meeting of the UNCED, gender issues were given little attention and it was only after intense lobbying for women from women that resulted in appointment of Filomina Chioma from Sierra Leone as a special advisor on women in environment and development to the conference of secretary-general. The appointment of Filomina Chioma did not affect the working of UNCED as the men outnumbered women by large numbers and these men were elite to be more precise. Thus, in the delegations at UNCED there were fewer women compared to men. Leaving the exceptions of Gro Harlem Brundtland of Norway and President Finnbogadottin of Iceland there were no other women heads of state or government who attended the two two-day summit of UNCED.

Nonetheless, if we carefully examine certain UN provisions the fact that women's contribution has not been totally sidelined. Principle 20 of the Rio Declaration assigns due importance to women's role in environmental management and development. The declaration realized in order to achieve sustainable development women's full participation is the most essential (UNCED, 1992). Agenda 21 dedicates a whole chapter to the role of women, the rather gawkily titled, 'Global action for women towards sustainable development'. Chapter 24 says that successful execution of a variety of international programmes previously in place for the 'full, equal and beneficial integration of women in development activities' will depend on the 'active involvement of women in economic and political decision-making and will be critical to the successful implementation of Agenda 21' (UNCED, 1992, para 24). Both, principle 20 and chapter 24 stand for democratization of governance by including women and giving scope for increased participation of women in environmental governance and the pursuit of sustainable development.

Thus, it is worth noting women's contribution in many environmental movements. Some inspiring grassroots

projects like that of Chipko movement surrounded by Indian peasants to safeguard forests and live-stone deposits from 'formal' economy, the Greenbelt movement of Kenya Women, led by Wangari Maathai, which won an alternative Nobel Prize; and model farming by Acao Feminea Democratica Gauca in the Amazon- are internationally much-admired movements. The Women's Action Agenda 21, a report of the 1991, World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet, put forward that "Women are a powerful force for change" [2]. And that 'by acting in unison, by organizing cooperatives and by managing credit and financing institutions, women can help change policy, protect the environment, improve their standards of living and challenge current economic analyses' [5].

A quick glance of recent times would reflect that women's efforts were sidelined to the extent that their remarkable role in the environment protection debate has been completely over shrouded. Women's voice and concerns are often silenced and neglected. Hence, the present era should recognize women's contribution to enhance the environmental discourse that needs creative conceptual work and practical interventions. In addition, the whole discourse of environment would be of no significance if it does not incorporate women's dimension of decision-making and problem-solving into local, national and international environment policy-making. Certainly, women voices require to be heard by not only integrating them and making their involvement in a structure that has systematically marginalized them rather as a substitute of just giving due attention to their full participation it would be something productive if adequate attention would be given to the underlying gender inequities and power relationships within those structures. Therefore, it is perceptive to give importance to gender inequity while acknowledging and addressing the women's concerns.

REFERENCES

1. A, Rodda. Women and the Environment . London: Zed Books, 1991.
2. Agarwal, B. "The Gender and Environment Debate: Lesson From India." Feminist Studies 18, no. 1 (1992): 119-158.
3. B, Trivedi, and Jain S. Environmental Issues in India. New Delhi: Discovery Publishing House, 2007.
4. Elliott, L. The global politics of the environment. London: Macmillan Press, 1998.
5. Engel, J R, and J G Engel. Ethics of Environment and Development Global Challenge and International Response. London: Belhaven Press, 1990.
6. J, Brohman. Popular Development, Rethinking the Theory and Practice of Development. Cambridge : Blackwell Publisher, 1996.
7. J, Jacobson. "Gender Bias: Roadblock to sustainable development." World Watch Institute, 1992: Worldwide Paper no.110.
8. Maria, M. Patriarchy and Accumulation on a world scale. London: Zed Books, 1986.
9. Ramchandra, Guha. "Environmentalism of the Poor." Economic and Political Weekly 37, no. 3 (2002): 204-207.

10. Rosemary. *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards Feminist Theology*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1983.
11. Salleh, Ariel. *Deeper than Deep Ecology: The Ecofeminist Connection*. Environmental Ethics, 1984.
12. V, Shiva. *Ecology and the politics of survival in India*. New Delhi: Sage, 1988.
13. Val, Plumwood. *Feminist and the Mastery of Nature*. London: Routledge, 1993.
14. Vandana, Shiva. *Staying Alive: Women, ecology and survival in India*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1991.
15. Warren, Karen J. "The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism." *Environmental Ethics* 12, no. 3 (1990): 124-126.
16. UNICE/UNEP 1991, *Women and children First, Report of the Symposium on the impact of poverty and environmental degradation on women and children*. Geneva, 27-30 May.
17. United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, (1992a), *Report of the UN Conference on Environment and Development: Annex I, Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, A/CONF. 151/26 (VOL.I)*, 12 August.
18. United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, (1992a), *Report of the UN Conference on Environment and Development: Annex II, Agenda 21, A/CONF. 151/26 (VOL.I-III)*, 12 August.