

Gender and Environment: Uneven Distribution of Resources

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Abstract

This essay examines the gendered dimensions of environmental degradation in India through the theoretical framework of ecofeminism, exploring the structural relationship between the subordination of women and the exploitation of nature. It analyses how the twin processes of statization and privatization, inherited from the colonial period and continued in postcolonial India, have transformed access to communal resources along the intersecting axes of gender, class, and caste. The essay argues that environmental degradation disproportionately affects rural and marginalized women by increasing their burdens of unpaid labour, limiting access to natural resources, undermining livelihoods, worsening health and nutritional outcomes, and eroding indigenous ecological knowledge. At the same time, it highlights the central role of women in environmental conservation and grassroots ecological movements, demonstrating their agency in resisting unsustainable patterns of development. The essay further examines the persistence of gender stereotyping and the marginalization of LGBT communities in India, arguing that these forms of inequality are rooted in shared systems of social hierarchy and exclusion. By situating environmental injustice within broader structures of gendered and social power, the study contends that sustainable development and ecological justice cannot be achieved without addressing intersecting inequalities based on gender, class, caste, and sexuality. It concludes that meaningful environmental justice requires a transformative reorganization of social, economic, and political institutions to ensure both ecological sustainability and social equality.

Keywords: *ecofeminism, gender and environment, environmental degradation, statization and privatization, gender stereotyping, lgbt inequality*

Introduction

Lack of gender equality not only limits equal access to resources and opportunities, but also imperils the life prospects of future generations. In the present article an attempt has been made to examine the problem of gender inequality and the condition of women in rural and poor households in India, and how they are becoming victims of environmental degradation in quite gender-specific ways. Although environmental change has specific differentiated impacts on different genders, which requires a gender-specific approach to examine these complex linkages which may be referred to as "the gender and environment nexus" known as ecofeminism. As a body of thought, ecofeminism is yet underdeveloped and still developing,

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but carries a growing advocacy. Ecofeminism argues that the subjugation of women and the ruin of the natural world are alike products of patriarchy and capitalism, which further lead to the statization and privatization of communal resources; both processes have affected the patterns of access to and use of natural resources. Though feminist and environmental movements both stand for "egalitarian" and "non-hierarchical" systems and encourage women to become active agents in these movements. Later, this article also throws light on the issue of gender stereotyping and LGBT inequality, and how they bear the repercussions of social and economic marginalisation due to discrimination based on their gender identity.

Unsettling the Meanings of Gender

The now near-universal deployment of the word "gender" across development and environmental debate can be read as an effort to fix a meaning that has never truly been fixed. Scholars who turn to gender research hoping for firm guidance on inequality have at times been handed ready-made conclusions about what women and men supposedly are. In broad terms the word gathers up the traits by which societies sort people according to prevailing ideas of manhood and womanhood. Conventionally it is treated as a cultural coating laid over biological sex, so that someone born male is expected to display masculine qualities; yet even objects possessing neither hormones nor organs are routinely assigned a gender.

Unearthing Gender in Environmental History

Neither gender nor environment possesses a single, universally accepted meaning. Both concepts have been shaped by particular historical experiences, cultural traditions, and intellectual debates, causing their interpretations to vary across societies and academic disciplines. Within academic work each can be regarded as a kind of construct whose sense shifts from one setting to another rather than holding steady across the globe (MacGregor, 2019). Rather than being fixed categories, both gender and environment are socially constructed concepts whose meanings vary across historical, political, economic, and cultural contexts. Consequently, the field of gender and environment encompasses diverse theoretical perspectives. While some scholars employ the broader concept of environment to analyse society's relationship with the natural world, others prefer nature or ecofeminism to foreground the gendered and political dimensions of ecological inequality. Collectively, these perspectives demonstrate that environmental issues are inseparable from the social structures that shape human-nature relations.

Ecofeminist scholarship has made an important contribution by questioning conventional assumptions about both gender and the environment. Greta Gaard (2011) argues that human beings should not be viewed as separate from nature but as fundamentally embedded within ecological systems, a position that pushes back against earlier essentialist strands of ecofeminism by insisting on a material, non-hierarchical relationship between humans and other species.

Similarly, Donna Haraway (1991) fuses feminist critique with the study of scientific practice, and in doing so works out a strikingly material way of thinking about nature and gender together that later writers would treat as a cornerstone of ecofeminist theory. She challenges the traditional separation between nature and culture by demonstrating that scientific

knowledge itself is influenced by gendered and social assumptions. Her work encourages a more critical understanding of how ideas about nature are produced rather than treating them as objective or politically neutral.

Sherilyn MacGregor (2019) argues that mainstream environmental scholarship and policy often overlook women's experiences by treating environmental issues as gender-neutral. Unless feminist scholars consciously foreground women's perspectives, their contributions and the specific challenges they face remain marginalised within environmental debates. Bina Agarwal (1992) advances a similar argument, maintaining that meaningful environmental reform must proceed alongside the transformation of gender relations. She contends that feminist environmentalism requires not only challenging unequal divisions of labour and access to resources between women and men but also questioning the unequal concentration of control over natural resources. What she terms feminist environmentalism insists that neither front can safely be ignored (Agarwal, 1992, pp. 119-121).

Feminism and the Mastery of Nature

A central theme within ecofeminist scholarship is the historical association of women with nature and men with culture. Because many societies have traditionally regarded culture as superior to nature, this symbolic distinction has also contributed to the perception of women as subordinate to men. Sherry Ortner attributes this association to women's biological role in reproduction, arguing that reproductive functions have historically been used to locate women closer to nature than men. Ariel Salleh similarly contends that women's experiences of menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth foster a distinctive relationship with the natural world. Carolyn Merchant and Ynestra King likewise observe that ideological interpretations of women's biology have reinforced the belief that women possess an inherent affinity with nature.

Merchant (1980) also observes that capitalism and the growth of a market-oriented culture in Europe undermined the image of an organic cosmos with a living female earth at its centre, which gave way to a mechanistic worldview in which nature was reconceived as something to be mastered and controlled by humans.

The ecofeminist Vandana Shiva (1988) argues that the mistreatment of women and the degradation of nature are connected on both an ideological and a material level. Ideologically, she points to the older Indian cosmological understanding of nature as Prakriti, a dynamic and diverse feminine energy, or Shakti, whose union with the masculine principle, Purusha, was believed to bring the world into being (Shiva, 1988, pp. 38-41). Materially, she observes that women in the global South depend directly on the natural world to sustain themselves, their households, and their wider communities, so that the ruin of nature effectively strips away the very resources on which their survival rests (Shiva, 1988, pp. 42-45).

As Bina Agarwal (1992) points out, because natural resources are shared out unequally, the everyday experiences they generate differ from one group to another, and the knowledge that grows out of those experiences is shaped in the same uneven way (p. 132).

The Western model of modernization taken up by many countries of the global South has reshaped how different classes and social groups can reach and draw on natural resources. As Bina Agarwal explains, a division of labour and an allocation of resources such as property and power run along the lines of gender, class, caste and race; these axes organize the way people engage with the natural world and therefore also condition how environmental change bears on them and how far they can respond to it. In her account the two decisive drivers of the class- and gender-specific consequences of that change are privatization and the extension of state control (Agarwal, 1992, pp. 130-135). In India the growth of state control, begun under colonial administration and carried on after independence, steadily brought forests and village commons under the state while opening them to only a chosen few. Running in parallel, communal holdings were increasingly transferred into private and largely male hands. As Agarwal notes, much of the common land in the country's northwest had long been what might be called "community-private": communal in character yet exclusionary, since the right to use it was normally reserved for members of the community.

Consider now the class- and gender-linked fallout of environmental degradation, privatization and state appropriation included, which has produced a lopsided sharing-out of resources across at least six important dimensions: time, income, nutrition, health, networks of social support, and traditional knowledge. Every one of these matters throughout rural India, though how sharply they bite, and how they feed into one another, varies from region to region with local differences in the sexual division of labour, social ties, ways of making a living, and kinship. Because it is chiefly women who collect fuel, fodder and water, it is above all their day, already stretched to some ten or twelve hours, that grows longer as forests, waters and soils are depleted and access to them shrinks. In Odisha, for instance, scarce drinking water has added to the time and effort demanded of women and young girls; where a low-caste woman may reach only a single well, its running dry can mean an endless wait while upper-caste women fill their vessels first.

A recent Nepal study showed that, as deforestation forced women to spend far longer gathering firewood, the hours they could give to farming fell sharply, bringing with it a corresponding drop in the output of maize, wheat and mustard, crops grown mainly by women in that region, and thus a direct loss of income (Agarwal, 1992). Across rural India the shrinking supply of fuel wood carries a further nutritional cost; as rural women themselves observe, what fuels the cooking fire can matter just as much as what is placed in the pot. The social and cultural discrimination woven through many customary and religious practices points to one plausible route by which bias against women leaves them without an equitable share of food. Such gendered inequities in the way food and health care are parcelled out within families are visible even in a metropolis like Delhi. When I asked a middle-aged domestic worker in my neighbourhood whether every member of her household received an equal portion of fresh food, she explained that women are raised from childhood to treat their husbands as godlike, customarily serving the men of the family first and themselves last, so that they routinely eat whatever is left over while the fresh food is reserved for the males.

Over and above the health effects of poor nutrition, women in the countryside are also brought into more immediate contact with water-borne illness, and with rivers and ponds contaminated

by fertilizer and pesticide run-off, precisely because of the chores that fall to them, such as fetching water for the household's various needs. And when tainted water then sickens the family, that load too descends on women, who are the ones left nursing the unwell.

In her article, Bina Agarwal (1992, pp. 145-146) describes how tribal communities in Odisha, in eastern India, report that the older bonds of mutual sharing and informal support have largely broken down. Where women once leaned on their neighbours in times of need, that reliance has given way to a feeling of isolation and helplessness. She shows, too, that women's indigenous knowledge carries a class and gender specificity, tied to the class-specific and gendered way labour is divided. Merely knowing how to weather drought, famine and the gathering of wild food demands a detailed grasp of which plants, roots and trees are nourishing or medicinal, an everyday competence that turns critical for surviving the drawn-out shortages of a climatic disaster.

Women: A Critical Agent of Change?

Sociologist Lisa Brush (2003) makes a classification that is useful for thinking about environmental policy and gender. She points out the distinction between the "governance of gender" and the "gender of governance." The governance of gender refers to how states and social policies produce and police the boundaries between masculinity and femininity, and thus enforce or undermine male privilege in everyday life. No doubt, both the state and the people most immediately affected by environmental degradation have responded to these processes, but in diverse ways. In many cases, far from benefiting the poor, these schemes have taken away even existing rights and resources, leading to widespread local resistance.

But should we see people in general, and women in particular, solely as victims of environmental degradation and of ill-conceived top-down state policies? Women have been active participants in most nonviolent protests, including the Chipko Movement, the Narmada Valley Project, the Koel-Karo movement in Bihar, and the Silent Valley Project in Kerala; women have been a visible part of most rural grassroots' ecological initiatives. These movements indicate that although poor peasant and tribal communities in general, and women among them, are being severely affected by environmental degradation and appropriation, they are today also critical agents of change (Agarwal, 1992).

According to feminist scholars, women possess a specifically feminine sensibility or cognitive temperament, or women qua women have certain traits that predispose them to attend to particulars, to be interactive rather than individualist, and to understand the true character of complex natural processes in holistic terms. Women, more than any other group, still maintain a reciprocal link with nature's resources -- a link that stems from a given organization of production, reproduction, and distribution, including a given gender division of labour. All of this shows that state developmental policies are themselves a significant cause of the crisis.

The Persistence and Dominance of Gender Stereotypes

How Does Gender Stereotyping Develop?

Gender stereotypes begin to develop early in life through socialization and patriarchal social structures. From the very start, children are taught that girls should play with dolls and boys

should play with trucks, that boys should be directed toward blue and green while girls are directed toward red and pink. According to social role theory, gender stereotypes derive from the discrepant distribution of men and women into social roles both in the home and at work. In the Indian context, families would historically keep having children until sons were born, with the girls being born while waiting for the son. Although people often presume that gender-based stereotypes target women, stereotypes geared toward men exist as well. For example, an employer may believe that a woman is better equipped for a job because women are more sensitive than men, or because a woman is more sexually appealing. In business too, women continue to experience the negative effects of gender bias, namely lower pay women's annual earnings were less than 83 percent of men's in 2020, with an even wider pay gap for women of colour (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021).

There Can Be No LGBT Equality Without Gender Equality

We have already examined how environmental degradation and the seizure of natural resources by a privileged minority carry particular class-gender and locational implications. But the gender bias that thwarts women's progress also underlies discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. This raises the question of why the issues of gender disparity and LGBT inequality are so often discussed separately from one another, as if they were mutually exclusive. The main reason behind this is gender stereotyping, which is defined as an overgeneralization of characteristics, differences, and attributes of a certain group based on their gender. Gender stereotypes create widely accepted biases about certain characteristics or traits and perpetuate the notion that each gender and its associated behaviours are binary. Under this assumption, when a man or a woman acts differently from how their gender is expected to behave, there is a disconnect in the evaluator's mind.

Every day, transgender and gender-nonconforming people withstand the most severe social and economic marginalisation due to discrimination based on their gender identity or expression. Studies indicate that a substantial proportion of transgender individuals experience serious discrimination, limiting their access to education, employment, healthcare, housing, and other essential resources. Such exclusion is not merely the result of individual prejudice but is embedded within institutional practices and social norms that privilege cisgender identities. Consequently, many transgender persons remain disproportionately represented in informal and precarious occupations because barriers to formal employment continue to restrict their economic opportunities. Family rejection, educational exclusion, workplace discrimination, and inadequate social protection collectively reinforce cycles of poverty and marginalisation. These structural inequalities demonstrate that the struggle for gender equality cannot be confined to the experiences of cisgender women alone; it must also address the systemic disadvantages faced by transgender and gender-diverse communities, whose access to dignity, livelihood, and citizenship remains uneven despite significant legal and policy advancements.

Vyjayanti Vasanta Mogli, a trans woman, LGBT activist, and public policy scholar at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad, who has openly spoken about her abuse at school, says that lesbian women and trans men in rural areas end up at the bottom of the hierarchy when it

comes to basic human rights within the unit of family and village (Patel, 2016). Both case studies depict how transgender people face transphobic harassment, ignorance, and bias.

M. V. Lee Badgett (2014), professor of economics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Williams Institute Distinguished Scholar, and World Bank consultant, develops a model to estimate the economic cost of stigma negative attitudes toward LGBT people and the exclusion of LGBT people from social institutions such as education, employment, families, and health care. Lower wages and unemployment are associated with poverty, and therefore LGBT people are likely to have higher rates of poverty. Evidence of poverty among LGBT people is emerging in India: third-gender people in Chhattisgarh involved in a leadership development project were found to be mostly living below the poverty line, most making a living through begging, sex work, or dancing at weddings; and a study of kothis in Chennai found that family rejection exacerbated the risk of poverty.

To understand Indian attitudes toward LGBTQ people, it is important to understand the basic legal context for LGBT people under Indian law. The 2011 Indian Census marked the first time that another category was added to the male and female options on the question about sex, providing a third-gender category, and on April 15, 2014, the Supreme Court of India ruled in *National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India*. The ruling paved the way for transgender people to use a third-gender category on important identity documents. The Court also declared transgender people to be a "socially and educationally backward class," entitling them to affirmative action in education and government employment. In addition, the Court directed the government to include transgender people in social welfare schemes, to provide appropriate medical care, and to increase public awareness. This far-reaching decision could lead to rapid improvements in the legal, social, and economic status of transgender people, since such protections had not previously been available at the national or state level. However, these decisions by the Court create a protected category for transgender persons such as hijras while, at the same time, leaving them within the purview of criminality for their sexual conduct under other provisions of law.

Conclusion

This essay has provided a descriptive analysis of the phenomenon of gender discrimination. It first dissected the meanings of gender, finding that the term broadly denotes a range of identities that do not correspond to established ideas of male and female. It then illustrated how gender and environment are the products of specific historical and cultural contexts, and how, beside using the anthropocentric term "environment," scholars prefer an agential "nature" or ecofeminism to politicize the term. Subsequently, the essay investigated ecofeminist writings that help to unsettle and explain the link between women's inequality and environmental degradation, and pointed out how the coming of colonialism and capitalism, which sustained domination by a small group of people over the rest of the population, affected equal access to resources across different genders, classes, and social groups. Whereby poor rural women are often the first to be excluded from equal social standing and to become victims of environmental degradation rather than active participants in environmental protest. Yet, as this essay has shown, women have also emerged as critical agents of change within these very struggles.

The essay has further indicated how states and social policies produce the boundaries between masculinity and femininity, thereby enforcing or undermining male privilege in everyday life, and has extended this analysis to gender disparity and LGBT inequality, showing how these communities experience ongoing discrimination and bias in public settings (whether on the street, in a theatre, at a restaurant, or in the utilisation of government services) on a daily basis. Although progress in terms of LGBTQ rights has been made by the Indian government, and attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people have changed over the past few decades, the implications of anti-LGBTQ prejudice and discrimination remain a significant issue of concern. Ultimately, when gender equality increases, so does overall life satisfaction for everyone, not just women - since gender inequality clearly impacts not only women but other genders too, some more than others. We strongly need gender quotas to pursue a radical redistribution of this power dynamic. Though quotas may work in some contexts, a more holistic approach is needed. Especially the one that includes a radical reorganization of society and a serious rethinking of traditional gender roles. If we do not like gender quotas, then we must be active in building a world where they are unnecessary.

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