



4. The environment, climate and gender equality

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This text is part of a series of publications on gender research and gender equality that has been produced by researchers at KTH as part of the efforts at KTH to integrate knowledge about gender equality, diversity and equal conditions in education. The purpose of the series is to disseminate, in an accessible way, knowledge from gender research in various subject areas that are relevant to students, doctoral students and teachers at KTH.

This text describes the connection between environmental issues and issues of feminism and gender equality. It describes how, from the very beginning, the environmental movement was a struggle about perspectives and the ways in which it is good and fair to conserve resources. The text highlights the view of feminism in relation to sustainability issues and also presents statistics, broken down by gender, to illustrate the impact of women and men on the environment.

Survival issues

Environmental issues were important survival issues long before we actually started calling them "environmental issues". The first publication of a pamphlet protesting the poor quality of urban air took place as early as the 17th century, as did the first petition against deforestation – both in Great Britain (Radkau, 2014). But these events did not represent a movement, and what we now refer to as "the environmental movement" actually originated from a number of different issues and approaches relating to nature. At the end of the 18th century, an alarm was raised concerning the destruction of forest and shortage of timber throughout Europe. This resulted in a struggle for perspective on how shared resources should best be managed. It was also in the German forestry industry that the term sustainable started to be used around 1800, at the same time that the economist Thomas Malthus began talking about the limits to growth, in particular population growth. Malthus' book *An Essay on the Principle of Population* presented the theory that, if no political measures are taken, the population will become larger than the available supply of food. In other words, issues concerning natural resources and how they should be managed have been around for a very long time. When we today sometimes hear someone say that 'now we know everything we need to know, we simply must act to save the climate', we

need to be reminded that there are different opinions and perceptions about good solutions and the types of natural resources that are important to preserve. The question of who has the right to impact nature is a key issue.

The environmental discourse and women

The modern environmental movement was born around 1900. It was then that the environmental problems in cities became really apparent – the stench, and the air full of smog. In the 1960s, Rachel Carson (1962) published her book *Silent Spring*, which warned readers about the use of pesticides, in particular DDT. The book went on to become a bestseller. The environmental movement gathered momentum, and environmental issues soon ended up on the agenda in the international arena, including in Stockholm in 1972 at *The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment*. It was also at this time that the term environment went from meaning the surrounding natural world and was given an ecological meaning and began being used in relation to the interaction that takes place between different living organisms, including human beings.

At the same time, interest was awoken in women's particular connection to environmental issues, including through Ester Boserup's publication *Woman's Role in Economic Development*. This book became an important eye-opener and had an impact on the work of the UN, among others. Boserup was a pioneer when it comes to documenting the workload that has long been placed on women who perform most of the housework, obtain and prepare food and gather water and fuel in Africa south of the Sahara. Women have always been important in farming, in particular beyond the commercial farming systems of companies, but this was not taken into account in earlier economic theory and development practice. The work of women was made invisible, as was the importance of their work for the development of society. Boserup pointed this out and even claimed that the development measures managed by the western world in developing countries reduced the status of and opportunities for women.

In a UNDP report entitled *Human Development Report*, which was published in 1995, time use data was presented to show that women work more hours than men on average, which Boserup had highlighted long before. Since then, global institutions such as the World Bank and UN have worked to highlight and show the importance of women's activities. *Gender mainstreaming* is now an established strategy and means that gender equality should be part of the regular work within all political areas and decisions. During the 1990s, gender was increasingly connected to the environment and sustainable development, as shown, for example, at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 and the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. It was deemed important to involve women in decisions concerning the environment at all levels, to integrate the perspective of gender into policies and programmes for sustainable development, and to evaluate

developmental and environmental policies with regard to their effects on women. It was also stated that women have an important role to play in sustainable development when it comes to consumption and production and methods for management of natural resources, as well as in relation to innovation and action at local level.

Ecofeminism

Women's particular connection to the environment and development was also highlighted in other arenas. The term ecofeminism was coined by the French activist and writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in the 1970s and was soon intercepted by feminist researchers in the USA, who showed that society's subordination of women has many similarities to the exploitation of nature. The oppression of women and nature was considered to be intertwined, and the message from researchers was that the women's movement and the ecological movement need to unite. Carolyn Merchant is viewed as one of the founders of ecofeminism. In her book *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1980), she explores the scientific revolution from a feminist and ecological perspective and analyses the question of how western culture shifted away from revering the Earth as a living organism, a life-giving mother, and towards viewing it as a machine that is controlled by people/men. There is an ancient relationship between women and nature, a connection that exists in all cultures, language areas and historical shifts. In her book, Merchant explores this relationship by examining the connection between women and nature that arose when modern science and the modern economy took shape in the 16th and 17th centuries. The view of science as an indicator of success is challenged, and it is instead claimed that science has contributed to the ecological crisis, the exploitation of nature and the disparagement of women. Merchant emphasises the importance of the environmental movement's vision of living within nature's cycle, in balance with nature and without constantly increasing exploitation. Vandana Shiva, an Indian researcher and activist, is a well-known representative of the idea that the marginalisation of women and the destruction of nature go hand in hand. She is critical of the global market economy, the western world's development paradigm, the focus on technology, the modernisation process and the destruction of the environment, as well as society's oppression of women. Shiva means that we must view people as a part of nature rather than thinking that people must free themselves from nature.

Ecofeminism has attracted criticism, including the claim that it represents an American and western world perspective. Ecofeminist ideas have also been described as utopian, and it has been suggested that this could be an advantage. Lucy Sargisson, for example, claims that utopian thinkers and utopias are inspiring. Utopias offer imaginative alternatives to real political and social dilemmas, and they are creative expressions of a political desire. They are intellectually challenging and interdisciplinary. The utopia of ecofeminism can be described as a way of living in harmony with nature and addresses themes such as flows, cycles and rhythms. In other words, it has another form of expression than the dominant idea of linear

development. Ecofeminism offers a vision of a link between people and nature. In a retrospective review of *The Death of Nature* in 2006, Merchant similarly expresses that a way of relating to the dualism of nature/culture is to focus on the relationship between production and reproduction, and not to describe nature as a woman. People have a partnership with nature in which both are active parties. Merchant and other ecofeminist researchers have also highlighted that the socially constructed connection between women and nature is not static but rather changeable.

Ecofeminism is not the only type of feminism that identifies a connection between environmental issues and issues concerning gender, equity and power. The book *Feminist Political Ecology* (1996) lists a number of feminist ideologies that also include the environment. Furthermore, the environmental movement has, in general, started to address issues of gender equality, in particular by including women in a liberal-feminist manner, which means that focus is placed on equal rights and opportunities for participation regardless of gender. In this book, a new conceptual framework, feminist political ecology, is developed in order to understand and interpret local experiences in an age of change with regard to both the environment and the economy. The way in which gender, class and culture influence our understanding of and interest in the environment is analysed, and a less modernistic approach to protecting the environment is advocated. Feminist political ecology has also shown how many women's movements are engaged in environmental issues and how they question common ways of thinking in relation to the economy and lifestyle. They reflect on how a diversity of societies can live in a green and equitable manner.

Power perspective on the environment

Issues of power have been brought up explicitly in some parts of this text, but such issues also pervade the text implicitly. This has to do with the question of who has the possibility to influence the dominant view of nature, development and what constitute good solutions to environmental issues. These days, technological solutions are often advocated, although solutions may also concern approaches such as consuming less of the Earth's resources. Research shows that, as categories of people, women and men to some extent view nature in different ways, impact the environment in different ways and are affected by environmental damage in different ways. Even though the categories of women/men are not homogeneous groups, this is a categorisation that often appears in statistics. So what do such statistics show?

There are differences in how men and women impact the environment as well as how they are affected by environmental problems. OECD (2021) shows evidence of many gender-based differences, e.g. that men are exposed to more air pollution outdoors, while women are exposed to more air pollution indoors. OECD has shown how women are more affected by climate change. One example provided is that of the heatwave in France at the beginning of the 21st century, which led to a premature death for 15,000 people, with a death rate that was 75% higher for women than men. A study in Sweden shows that men's consumption causes more carbon dioxide

emissions than women's consumption. Men drive cars more than women. Swedish travel data from 2020 shows that men use a car at a rate of almost 26 kilometres per person and day, while for women the corresponding figure is just less than 17 kilometres per day (Transport Analysis, 2021).

According to the European Investment Bank's latest climate survey, women are more prepared to change their lifestyle in order to combat climate change than men are. At the same time, a new Swedish study by Nicole Kling, which is based on in-depth interviews with cohabiting heterosexual couples, shows that female-coded environmental strategies, such as refraining from environmentally damaging activities such as eating meat and travelling by plane, are viewed as excessive forms of environmental engagement, while male-coded strategies, such as investing in green technology in the form of products such as electric cars and solar panels, are viewed as more desirable.

But even if it is the case that women have less impact on the environment than men, it is important not to forget other perspectives of equity. If we consider the planetary boundaries, this means that there are limits to how much we can impact nature. We only have one planet, and it has ecological boundaries. There are many countries that have far less impact on the Earth than Sweden. Chancel and Piketty (2015) point out that emissions increase with increased income. In general, high-income earners are responsible for more emissions than those who earn less. The poor part of the world is only responsible for a very small percentage of all emissions, yet it suffers greatly from the effects of climate change.

Summary

In summary, this text has discussed how, from the very beginning, environmental issues were a struggle for perspective in relation to how shared resources should be managed. When environmental issues became increasingly apparent, the environmental movement gathered momentum and these issues ended up on the agenda in the international arena, including at the UN conference in Stockholm in 1972. It was at this time that attention was also drawn to gender-related inequities connected to the environment and development, and how the development that was led by the western world reduced women's opportunities in developing countries by disregarding women's connection to farming beyond the commercial farming systems. Global institutions such as the World Bank and UN later began to highlight and show the importance of women's activities.

Within research, the term ecofeminism was coined in the 1970s, a field which highlights how society's subordination of women has many similarities to the exploitation of nature. People's connection to nature needs to be clarified and highlighted in order to avoid overconsumption of the planet's natural resources. This is an idea that has gained strong support with the help of the concept of socio-ecological systems, in other words, that the social and ecological systems are

intertwined and interdependent. This idea pervades the research on the planetary boundaries, even though it is not usually attributed as being feminist. Following on from ecofeminism, a number of streams of environmental activism and research have included gender and feminist perspectives in various ways. Once again it is apparent that many women's movements are engaged in environmental issues and question common views of the economy and lifestyle. In other words, feminist environmental research and activism wants to show the existence of other possible paths of development – alternatives that do not lead to the overconsumption and overexploitation of the Earth's resources. In many respects, environmental issues are a question of how shared resources should best be managed, and there is still a need for a gender perspective as well as other perspectives of equity in relation to these issues.

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