

Ecofeminism: A Pathway to Achieving Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract

Ecofeminism explores the link between environmental degradation and gender inequality, advocating for sustainable development through the empowerment of women. This article examines how ecofeminist principles contribute to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to gender equality, climate action, and responsible consumption. Ecofeminism not only advances the SDGs but also highlights the critical role of women as environmental guardians. The paper also delves into various ecofeminist movements to understand their significance in the realisation of SDGs. The case studies discussed show how gender justice and ecological sustainability are deeply interconnected. By integrating ecofeminism into policymaking, societies can foster a more equitable and environmentally sustainable future.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Gender Equality, Policymaking, Sustainable Development Goals, United Nations

"The Earth's Voice is Feminine; it's time we finally listened."

- Carolyn Merchant

The term 'ecofeminisme' was introduced in 1974 by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne to highlight women's potential in bringing about an ecological revolution. Since then, ecofeminism has evolved into a significant global political movement and theoretical framework. While ecofeminist perspectives vary, they collectively emphasize the historical connections between 'women' and 'nature.' Ecofeminism views the domination of both nature and women as deeply interconnected. Ecofeminism builds upon fundamental feminist principles, advocating for gender equity, embracing alternative social structures beyond patriarchy, and promoting a perspective that appreciates natural cycles, interconnected systems, and the strengths of collaboration. In addition to these principles, ecofeminism incorporates a strong commitment to environmental concerns and explores the intricate links between women and nature. Ecofeminists argue that this system creates a hierarchical framework that gives males authority as well as enables for the subjugation of women (Bindal, 2021). This theory critically examines how patriarchal societies exploit both nature and women. Ecofeminists analyze the influence of gender identities to highlight how social norms contribute to the subjugation of both. Ecofeminists are of the view that it is the "logic of domination," in association with value-hierarchical thinking and value-dualisms that sustains and justifies the twin domination of women and nature (Warren, 1990). They argue that these structures create an incomplete world view and propose an alternative perspective one that considers the Earth sacred, acknowledges humanity's dependence on nature, and recognizes the inherent worth of all life.

In India, ecofeminism is not merely a theoretical concept but a lived experience, reflected in grassroots movements, traditional wisdom, and cultural narratives. Indian philosophy and religious texts have long recognized the sacredness of nature and its association with feminine energy. In her book, 'Staying Alive' Vandana Shiva observes:

Women in India are an intimate part of nature, both in imagination and practice. At one level nature is symbolized as the embodiment of the feminine principle and at another she is nurtured by the feminine to produce life and provide sustenance (Shiva, 2010) Concepts such as Prakriti (nature) and Shakti (divine feminine power) symbolize the interconnectedness between women and the environment. Goddess worship, especially of deities like Durga, Parvati, and Lakshmi, reinforces the idea of women as protectors and nurturers of life, just as nature sustains humanity.

Traces of ecofeminist thought can be found in various African and Caribbean communities that influenced each other during the colonial era. In these regions, rural women reclaiming their connection to the land symbolized class struggles, especially at times when urban movements were less visible. The historical link between women, land, political rights, and food production was well established in Eastern Africa and Jamaica as a response to colonial oppression. However, by the late 20th century, the dominance of European patriarchal perspectives weakened these women-led movements, limiting their impact on European ideologies.

Ecofeminism emerged from this historical awareness, along with experiences in local ecological and sustainability struggles. It offers a comprehensive framework for understanding life's diversity ranging from biodiversity conservation to intercultural competence. Central to this approach is the relationship between individuals and the environment. Men and women interact with nature in different ways. When development initiatives take over agricultural land for export-oriented production aimed at boosting the local economy, they often threaten the livelihoods of residents. In response, ecofeminist activists advocate for development models that reject Western social assumptions and integrate human rights with environmental concerns. Ecofeminist scholars examine the intersection of patriarchy and neoliberal globalization and their combined impact on women and the environment. However, this perspective is not the only contribution to the discourse on environmentalism and feminism. The field of environmental thought itself is diverse, encompassing multiple viewpoints and ongoing debates among theorists.

Ecofeminism and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Ecofeminism and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) share a common vision of creating a just, equitable, and sustainable world by addressing both environmental and gender-based injustices. Ecofeminism highlights the deep connection between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women, emphasizing that environmental degradation disproportionately affects marginalized communities, particularly women. The SDGs, particularly those related to gender equality (SDG 5), climate action (SDG 13), and life on land (SDG 15), align with ecofeminist principles by advocating for sustainable resource management, biodiversity conservation, and women's empowerment. By integrating ecofeminist perspectives into sustainable development efforts, we can foster holistic solutions that not only protect the environment but also promote social justice and gender inclusivity.

Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality

The SDG 5 of Gender Equality is the most crucial goal which would result in all other aspects of SDGs falling into place. Gender Equality aligns closely with ecofeminism, which argues that environmental degradation and gender inequality are interconnected. Ecofeminism highlights how patriarchal structures exploit both nature and women, making them more vulnerable to

ecological crises while also recognizing their critical role in environmental conservation and sustainable development.

Empowering women in environmental decision-making leads to more sustainable resource management. Women, particularly in developing regions, are often responsible for gathering food, water, and fuel, making them crucial stakeholders in conservation efforts. Promoting gender-inclusive policies ensures women's participation in land ownership, climate negotiations, and sustainable agriculture initiatives. Ecofeminism promotes the empowerment of women in environmental decision-making, ensuring their voices are heard in policies related to climate change, land use, and sustainability.

Women, particularly in rural and indigenous communities, are primary caregivers and sustainers of natural resources. These women play a key role in sustainable agriculture and resource management, making their inclusion in decision-making crucial, yet they often lack decision-making power regarding environmental policies. Ecofeminism argues that women's empowerment is essential for environmental justice, as women often bear the brunt of ecological destruction due to their roles in agriculture, water collection, and caregiving. Ecofeminism directly supports this goal by advocating for the empowerment of women, which is seen as essential for sustainable development. It highlights how environmental policies can intersect with gender equality, like ensuring women's access to resources like clean water, land, and energy.

Climate change and environmental degradation disproportionately affect women by increasing their burden of securing water, fuel, and food. Ecofeminism calls for women's leadership in climate action, sustainable agriculture policies, and biodiversity conservation, reinforcing SDG 5's emphasis on equal participation and leadership opportunities. Initiatives such as women-led afforestation projects, self-help groups for sustainable farming, and grassroots environmental movements demonstrate how gender equality can drive ecological sustainability. Ecofeminist approaches to SDG 5 advocate for policies that recognize women's traditional ecological knowledge, ensure their land rights, provide access to green technologies, and integrate gender-sensitive environmental policies. By addressing these systemic inequalities, ecofeminism strengthens the vision of SDG 5—creating a world where women are not just victims of environmental crises but leaders in shaping a sustainable and just future.

Sustainable Development Goal 13: Climate Action

Ecofeminism advocates for climate justice by addressing how environmental degradation disproportionately affects women, especially in marginalized communities. It promotes sustainable and community-led climate solutions where women play a central role. Ecofeminism emphasizes that climate change is a feminist issue since women, especially in developing countries, are more vulnerable to its impacts. It advocates for inclusive climate policies that recognize women's leadership in environmental conservation.

Ecofeminism brings attention to how climate change adversely affects women, especially in agrarian societies, and pushes for solutions that consider gender dynamics. It calls for inclusive climate strategies that involve women in decision-making. Taking urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts goes hand in hand with ecofeminism, which highlights the connection between environmental degradation and gender inequality. Climate change excessively affects women, particularly in rural and marginalized communities, as they are often responsible for securing food, water, and energy resources for their families. With increasing droughts, floods, and

deforestation, women face greater hardships in accessing these essential resources, exacerbating existing gender inequalities. Ecofeminism recognizes these challenges and advocates for climate action strategies that are inclusive, equitable, and centered around women's leadership in environmental conservation.

Women have historically played a key role in climate resilience and environmental sustainability, yet their contributions are often overlooked in mainstream climate policies. Ecofeminist movements emphasize women's traditional knowledge in sustainable agriculture, water conservation, and forest management as vital tools for mitigating climate change. Grassroot initiatives, such as the Chipko Movement in India, where women protected forests from commercial logging, or the Deccan Development Society, which promotes women-led sustainable farming, demonstrate the power of ecofeminist activism in combating climate change. These movements show that when women are empowered to participate in environmental decision-making, communities become more resilient to climate shocks.

Ecofeminism calls for gender-sensitive climate policies that ensure women's access to land, financial resources, and green technologies to support their role in climate adaptation and mitigation. Integrating ecofeminist perspectives into SDG 13 means recognizing that climate solutions must go beyond technological advancements and policy frameworks; they must also address social justice, gender equality, and community-driven approaches to sustainability. By elevating women's voices and leadership in climate action, ecofeminism not only strengthens the fight against climate change but also paves the way for a more just and sustainable world.

Sustainable Development Goal 15: Life on Land

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 15, titled "Life on Land," aims to protect, restore, and promote the sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, and stop biodiversity loss. This goal is crucial for maintaining ecological balance, ensuring food security, and mitigating climate change.

Ecofeminism, the movement that connects environmental and feminist concerns, provides a unique perspective on SDG 15. It argues that the degradation of nature is deeply linked to the exploitation of women and other marginalized communities. Ecofeminism critiques the patriarchal and capitalist systems that contribute to environmental destruction and advocates for a more harmonious relationship between humans and nature. Women, particularly in rural and indigenous communities, depend on forests, water bodies, and land for their livelihoods.

Ecofeminism argues that capitalist exploitation treats both women and nature as mere resources for profit. Industries such as logging, mining, and agribusiness prioritize profit over sustainability and social justice. Ecofeminists critique large-scale mining, monoculture plantations, and agribusinesses that harm biodiversity. Activists advocate for land rights, environmental justice, and fair resource distribution. Ecofeminist movements have led grassroots resistance against deforestation, land grabs, and pollution. Examples include the Chipko Movement in India, where women hugged trees to prevent deforestation, and Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement, which empowered women through reforestation efforts in Kenya. Women, especially in indigenous communities, have vast knowledge of sustainable agricultural practices and biodiversity conservation. Many ecofeminists advocate for the recognition of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) in policymaking.

Women farmers often engage in organic and regenerative farming, reducing land degradation. Ecofeminism encourages agroecology, seed-saving initiatives, and indigenous farming techniques. Many ecofeminist scholars push for stronger environmental protection laws. Women's involvement in environmental governance leads to better conservation policies. While SDG 15 aims to protect ecosystems and biodiversity, ecofeminism highlights the gendered dimensions of environmental degradation. By empowering women, valuing traditional knowledge, and challenging exploitative systems, ecofeminism provides critical insights into achieving SDG 15.

Case Studies:

Ecofeminist movements have emerged across the world, advocating for environmental sustainability, gender justice, and social equity. These movements highlight the connection between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women, working towards systemic change. Here are some significant ecofeminist movements globally which align with the core principles of the SDGs:

1. Chipko Movement (India): One of the earliest ecofeminist movements, the Chipko Movement began in the 1970s in Uttarakhand, India. Women, led by activists like Gaura Devi, hugged trees to prevent deforestation by logging companies. This movement emphasized the deep connection between women and nature, as forests were essential for their survival and livelihoods.
2. Green Belt Movement (Kenya): Founded by Wangari Maathai in 1977, the Green Belt Movement aimed to combat deforestation, desertification, and water scarcity in Kenya. Women were at the forefront, planting millions of trees to restore the environment while advocating for women's rights and community empowerment. This movement earned Maathai the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004.
3. Love Canal Movement (USA): In the late 1970s, Lois Gibbs led a movement in Love Canal, New York, after discovering toxic waste dumping near residential areas was causing severe health issues, particularly for women and children. This movement led to stricter environmental policies in the United States, highlighting the intersection of environmental health and social justice.
4. Standing Rock Protests (USA): The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and Indigenous women played a crucial role in resisting the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016. The movement, led by Indigenous ecofeminists like LaDonna Brave Bull Allard, fought to protect sacred lands, water resources, and Indigenous rights, gaining global attention for environmental justice.
5. Narmada Bachao Andolan (India): Led by Medha Patkar, this movement opposed the construction of large dams on the Narmada River, which displaced thousands of Indigenous and rural communities. Women activists played a crucial role in advocating for environmental protection, human rights, and sustainable development.
6. Women of the Amazon (South America): Indigenous women from the Amazon, such as Patricia Gualinga of Ecuador's Sarayaku community, have led protests against deforestation, oil extraction, and land grabs. These movements fight for Indigenous sovereignty, environmental conservation, and gender equality.
7. Navdanya (India): Founded by Vandana Shiva, Navdanya promotes organic farming, biodiversity conservation, and women's empowerment in agriculture. The movement opposes corporate control over seeds and supports sustainable farming practices led by women.

Conclusion

Ecofeminism provides a critical lens through which to examine the intersection of gender, ecology, and sustainable development. By highlighting the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation on women and marginalized communities, ecofeminism underscores the necessity of gender-inclusive policies for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Women, as primary caregivers, food producers, and environmental stewards, play a vital role in sustainable development, yet they continue to face systemic barriers to participation and decision-making.

Realizing the SDGs requires an integrated approach that combines environmental sustainability with gender justice. Addressing issues such as climate change, resource depletion, and social inequality through an ecofeminist perspective ensures that solutions are not only sustainable but also equitable. By empowering women, promoting ecological consciousness, and challenging exploitative systems, ecofeminism serves as a transformative force in building a just, resilient, and sustainable future for all.

A sustainable future requires an intersectional approach that recognizes the links between gender, ecology, and justice. The Women's Action Agenda 21 lays down that 'the interconnectedness of women, the environment, economic policies, development strategies, social justice and the survival of all species.' By incorporating ecofeminist principles into conservation efforts, policymakers and activists can create a more just and environmentally resilient world.

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