

Uncovering the Gendered Nature of Natural Resource Conflicts in “Developing” Countries

A Cultural Ecofeminist Analysis of Women’s Involvement in the Chipko Movement

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With the rapid “development” of southern nations, the spreading of capitalist monetary frameworks, and the implementation of economic and political policies causing environmental degradation, natural resource depletion is becoming an increasingly important issue in “developing” countries.¹ The Chipko forest-based resource movement in the Himalayas in the 1970s and 1980s provides an example of growing conflicts surrounding natural resource use. This movement is noteworthy because of the way it divided communities based upon gender. Although often overlooked, the men and women of the Himalayan hills had different perspectives about the use of their trees, distinct ways of mobilizing for action, and separate methods of garnering legitimacy for their cause. When an ecofeminist lens is applied to the movement, the importance of gender differences to natural resource conflicts becomes evident.

Ecofeminist theory suggests that there are connections between the domination of women and the domination of nature. This framework is based upon the belief that one form of oppression cannot be targeted without understanding its connections to other oppressions. The mutual oppression of and connection between women and nature makes women, in specific contexts, able to understand and act upon natural resources issues in ways that differ from their male counterparts.

¹ Natural resource depletion is also very important in “developed” nations, but is not the focus of this paper.

Although most natural resource discourses are considered to be “gender-neutral”, this paper will demonstrate that they are male-normative and ignore women’s experiences and perspectives. There are three significant ways that gender underlies natural resource debates. First, natural resource depletion, within specific contexts, has a profoundly different impact upon men and women. This is due to women’s and men’s unique positions in the gendered² division of labour. Second, women often develop different ways of mobilizing around environmental issues as a result of their exclusion from formal public institutions such as politics. Finally, women have particularly effective methods of gaining political legitimacy in resource debates based upon the historical conceptual links between women and nature. Essentially, women are impacted differently by natural resource depletion, have separate ways of mobilizing to stop the depletion, and have distinct ways of legitimating their actions. Current natural resource discourses that overlook women’s experiences may therefore be conceptually male-normative rather than gender neutral.

Far from essentializing women, this paper refers to differences between specific groups of men and women, which are based upon socially constructed divisions of labour, access to formal political structures, and traditional beliefs. This analysis intends to highlight the way things are, but not the way they have to be. The arguments are specific to Himalayan hill women, based on their daily material experiences. Although there may be parallels for other groups of women, particularly regarding the frameworks of domination affecting both women and nature, the experiences of other women must also be understood only within their unique contexts. This essay, therefore, proposes that gender is fundamentally intertwined with natural resource movements, but not that it is intertwined in the same way in all contexts.

² The term “gender” is used to recognize that the (arguably fluid) state of being a “man” or a “woman” is largely based upon socially constructed categories and assumptions. “Sex,” therefore, is not an appropriate term to use since it implies that all aspects of being a “man” or a “woman” are based upon one’s biological, anatomical, and/or genetic makeup. For more information about understandings of sex/gender, please see: Christine Delphy, “Rethinking Sex and Gender” in *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, ed. Carole R. McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim (New York: Routledge, 2003), 57-67.

Background on the Chipko Movement

The Chipko movement spread between Kashmir and Arunachal Pradesh in the Himalayas, India in the 1970s and 1980s.³ India has a long history of peasant discontent regarding forest resource-management. This unrest ignited under British colonial rule and grew after India gained independence in 1947.⁴ The emancipated government began signing corporate logging contracts for the area and imposed restrictions on local use of the forest. As a result, the hill people felt that the government was not effectively balancing the preservation of the forest with the need for local (as opposed to corporate and international) use and economic growth. Three distinct interest groups emerged: the government and corporations pursuing government-contracted logging, the male hill labourers demanding locally-controlled logging to strengthen local economies, and the hill women protecting the forest for their subsistence use.⁵ Women gravitated toward the idea of Chipko (literally “tree-hugging”) and began the forest preservation movement that lasted for two decades and spread across numerous villages.⁶ Given the complex interests and gender divisions in this forest resource debate, ecofeminism provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding the movement dynamics and implications.

Ecofeminism is based upon the shared principles of both the women’s movement and the ecology (or environmental) movement. Feminists “have argued that the goals of these two movements are mutually reinforcing and ultimately involve the development of worldviews and practices which are not based on models of domination.”⁷ For centuries

³ Shobita, Jain, “Standing Up For Trees: Women’s Role in the Chipko Movement” in *Women and the Environment*, ed. Sally Sontheimer (London: Earthscan Publications Ltd, 1991), 163, 164.

⁴ Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 153; Thomas Weber, *Hugging the Trees: The Story of the Chipko Movement* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc, 1989), 19-23.

⁵ Jain, 165; Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (London, UK: Zed Books Ltd, 1988), 70.

⁶ Weber, 11, 97.

⁷ Karen J. Warren, “Ecological Feminist Philosophies” in *Ecological Feminist Philosophies*, ed. Karen J. Warren (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996), x.

women have been linked to nature through socially constructed beliefs about passive, peaceful femininity and nurturing “Mother Nature.” The extraction of natural resources, for example, has been understood within a highly gendered and sexualized framework, whereby there is a “direct correlation between [resource extraction] and digging into the nooks and crannies of a woman’s body.”⁸ Women and nature are also commonly understood to be linked in a hierarchical binary whereby they are both considered irrational and needing to be controlled. On the other side of this binary, men and culture (culture being the binary opposition to nature) are considered rational and able to exert this control. The hierarchical and gendered beliefs about women and nature are ingrained within dominant frameworks of understanding the world.

Recognition of the overlapping oppression of women and nature will therefore help both ecological and feminist movements to work toward their goals. Rosemary R. Ruether was one of the first feminists to uncover these connections:

“Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women’s movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of...society.”⁹

The Application of an ecofeminist framework to natural resource issues may therefore promote a more useful understanding of both resource problems and the gendered nature of these problems.

⁸ Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature* (San Francisco: Harper Row Publishers, 1980), 39.

⁹ Rosemary R. Ruether, *New Woman New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: Seabury, 1975).

Of all the ecofeminist branches, cultural ecofeminism is the most effective for explaining the Chipko movement. Cultural ecofeminism emphasizes the links between women and nature since it suggests that, rather than attempting to disconnect women and nature (as some other ecofeminist frameworks propose), they should be liberated and valued together:

“Cross-culturally and historically women, as opposed to men, have been seen as closer to nature because of their physiology, social roles and psychology. Physiologically, women bring forth life from their bodies, undergoing the pleasures, pain and stigmas attached to menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing, while men’s physiology leaves them freer to travel, hunt, conduct warfare, and engage in public affairs. Socially, childrearing and domestic caretaking have kept married women close to the hearth and out of the workplace. Psychologically, women have been assigned greater emotional capacities with greater ties to the particular, personal and present than men who are viewed as more rational and objective with a greater capacity for abstract thinking. To cultural ecofeminists the way out of this dilemma is to elevate and liberate women and nature through direct political action.”¹⁰

Cultural ecofeminists suggest that, within specific contexts, certain groups of women have special links to nature due to their gender roles. Women’s experiences with reproduction and childcare may enable their development of a consciousness different from that of the “dominant western masculine forms of experiencing the world.”¹¹ Similarly, based on their experiences as caretakers, women may have cultural and spiritual ties to the earth and insights into equitable relations with nature that should be valued and incorporated into

¹⁰ Carolyn Merchant, *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 201-202.

¹¹ Ariel K. Salleh, “Epistemology and the Metaphors of Production: An Ecofeminist Reading of Critical Theory,” *Studies in the Humanities* 5, no.2 (1988): 130.

plans for sustainability.¹² An analysis of the Chipko movement through a cultural ecofeminist lens provides insight into fundamental, yet often overlooked, components of the movement.

Different Understandings of Nature Based on the Gendered Division of Labour

When cultural ecofeminist principles are applied to the Chipko movement, it becomes clear that the Himalayan hill women had a different understanding of the forest than did the men. The women's perspective arose from their unique place in the gendered division of labour within the economy and family.¹³ The men, removed from hill subsistence and childrearing practices and integrated into the formal economy, fought for their right to raw material to promote local industry.¹⁴ The women, left to subsist in the hill towns and to feed and clothe their children. Sought to preserve the forests which provided basic daily necessities such as food, water, shelter, agricultural tools, fodder for grazing cattle, fuel for cooking, soil stability, and climate control.¹⁵ As Vandana Shiva states, "while for women, tribals and other forest communities, a complex ecosystem is productive in terms of water, herbs, tubers, fodder, fertilizer, fuel, fiber and as a gene pool for the forester, these components are useless, unproductive waste and dispensable."¹⁶ The women's walk to the forest was several kilometers, which, combined with the labour, added up to an average of seven hours spent acquiring forest resources per day. Since the men were not involved in this work, they did not understand or consider that removing the forests would cause the women to walk up to nine kilometers farther per day. As trees sustained all aspects of their existence, the hill women were highly aware of the unique value of the different types of trees.¹⁷ For

¹² Brenda McLeod, "First Nations Women and Sustainability on the Canadian Prairies," *Canadian Women Studies* 23, no.1 (2004): 47.

¹³ Weber, 99.

¹⁴ Guha, 154.

¹⁵ Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 64.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 57.

example, the treasured mohwa tree grows flowers that may be eaten alone or used to make baking flour. If these trees had been replaced by more financially profitable vegetation, the women would have lost an important part of their subsistence resources. Weber writes, “when villagers are asked by Chipko activists what trees they want planted, the common reply from the men is...[cash crop] fruit trees. When the women voice their views, the answer is fuel and fodder trees.”¹⁸

Excluded from the formal economy, these women had little interest in the potential profits from tree harvesting. The Himalayan women “claim[ed] that cash crop trees mean little to them – the profits go into liquor and tobacco for the men folk.”¹⁹ It is essential, therefore, to recognize differences in men’s and women’s perspectives regarding resource issues. These differing viewpoints were at the root of the Chipko movement.

Much of the research about Chipko, unless explicitly ecofeminist,²⁰ is male-normative since it fails to recognize the importance of women’s involvement in the movement. Manish Tiwary’s discussion of the Chipko movement provides an excellent example of this problem when he states that, “Chipko failed to express the interests of the poor peasant society seeking employment opportunities and development.”²¹ While this statement may have been true for the Himalayan men, it overlooked that the women, responsible for feeding their families, depended on the forests remaining alive. Specifically, “for the women...forests are food, not in death, but in life.”²² By presenting the interests of the hill communities as homogeneously male, the unique and vital interests of the women

¹⁸ Weber, 100.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ For examples of ecofeminist work on the Chipko movement, see Shiva; Jain; Warren; and Douglas Buege, “Rethinking Again: A Defence of Ecofeminist Philosophy” in *Ecological Feminism*, ed. Karen J. Warren (New York: Routledge, 1994), 42-63.

²¹ Manish Tiwary, *Participatory Forest Policies and Politics in India* (London: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2004), 9.

²² Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 65.

involved were overlooked. This reaffirms the problematic belief that what is male or masculine is the norm while what is female or feminine is deviating from the norm.²³

Other sources describe the movement in supposedly “gender-neutral” terms (which are often male-normative) and then include a small section dedicated to women’s actions or what is termed “gender.”²⁴ Gender is presented as separate from the movement, rather than intertwined within it. What often goes unnoticed is that, by privileging the experiences of men as the norm, these texts are already loaded with gendered assumptions. Pointing out women’s experiences does not, therefore, introduce gender into natural resource discourses, but reveals how the discourses themselves are already fundamentally gendered.

Women’s Exclusion from Formal “Masculine” Political Structures

Research often fails to recognize the fundamentally gendered nature of traditional methods of understanding and acting upon resource issues. Formal political structures, for example, have largely excluded women are constructed based on conceptually “masculine” institutionalized norms.²⁵ One author wrote that within the Chipko movement “women work[ed] only as the limbs of the movement not as its brains.”²⁶ Clearly overlooking the fact that men have greater access to established methods of political organization, this statement appears to dismiss women’s agency in the movement because their actions were not carried out through conventional means. Shiva’s comment that “each new phase of Chipko is created by invisible women” speaks volumes about this oversight.²⁷

Before and during the Chipko movement, the hill women were excluded from the formal “masculine” sphere of politics and traditional mobilization patterns. The all-male

²³ Simone de Beauvoir, “The Second Sex: Introduction” in *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, ed. Carole R. McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim (New York: Routledge, 2003), 32-40.

²⁴ See Weber for an example.

²⁵ Georgina Waylen, *Gender in Third World Politics* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc, 1996), 14.

²⁶ G. Joshie, “‘Bare Himalaya’: A Himalayan Problem,” *Gandhi Marg* 20 (1980): 459-464.

²⁷ Vandana Shiva, “The Chipko Women’s Concept of Freedom” in *Ecofeminism*, ed. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publications, 1993), 247.

village councils and male household heads set village priorities.²⁸ The traditional social structure strongly discouraged women from participating in formal planning meetings. Women's daily unpaid forest-based labour made it impractical for them to participate in formal proceedings organized around male schedules and labour patterns.²⁹ Women discovered unconventional ways of mobilizing due to their exclusion from male organizational processes. Through informal, decentralized leadership, the hill women spread the message from village to village through the use of runners.³⁰ Songs and poems written about the issue also became very popular.³¹ Women set up their own cooperative societies (called mahila mandals) to provide support for other women.³² These societies became "an increasing source of strength for the environmental movement."³³ One group even employed a watchwoman to ensure the safety of the trees by monitoring the extraction of forest produce in the area.

In addition to unconventional organization and mobilization methods, women engaged in direct conflict with the loggers and government.³⁴ In March 1974, the men of Reni and neighbouring villages were tricked by the government into leaving the village to pick up financial reparations from an unrelated incident.³⁵ Precisely because women were not considered to be political actors by the male government, they assumed that the government-contracted loggers would be able to enter the town without any problems while the men were gone. One woman saw the approaching loggers and warned the others. The women gathered together, directly confronted the loggers, and convinced them to wait until their husbands returned so that the situation could be properly discussed. In 1978, women hid the axes of government-contracted loggers and returned them only when they agreed to leave.³⁶

²⁸ Jain, 164, 167; Weber, 100.

²⁹ Weber, 99.

³⁰ Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 73.

³¹ Shiva, "The Chipko Women's Concept of Freedom," 247.

³² Guha, 159.

³³ Weber, 97.

³⁴ Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 67.

³⁵ Guha, 159.

³⁶ Weber, 97.

Since these women had little previous contact with the Indian government and corporations, there were no established boundaries that they could not cross. The men, however, had long-standing relations with the government and “were more likely to respect and fear the Government as the national leader. From interaction with officials they [knew] the power of the government...and [believed] it wrong to oppose government forces.”³⁷ Cultural ecofeminism is therefore a useful tool to analyze women’s informal organizing since it recognizes that women can gain power without disconnecting themselves from nature and “femininity.” In this case, the hill women were able to use their lack of familiarity with traditional politics to their advantage by successfully organizing and challenging the government in effective, yet unconventional ways. Women’s exclusion from formal politics actually enabled them to protect the natural resources of the forest.

Women’s agency should not be romanticized, however. Although these women were able to use their exclusion from formal politics to their advantage, the oppressive structures that they faced cannot be ignored. Many barriers still need to be broken down with regard to women’s access to institutions such as formal politics. The effectiveness of women’s unconventional political mobilization as well as their unique perspectives and experiences, however, demonstrate that women should not simply be “put into” the current political system in order to achieve gender equality. The nature of the male-normative political system itself must be questioned and altered.

Historical Conceptual Links between Women and Nature

Cultural ecofeminism is useful in understanding why the historical conceptual links between femininity and nature are important in resource movements. Unlike other ecofeminist perspectives, cultural ecofeminism advocates that femininity does not need to be conceptually separated from nature in order for the oppression of both women and nature to be overcome.³⁸ The historical connection between femininity and nature may actually serve

³⁷ Weber, 100.

³⁸ Merchant, *Radical Ecology*, 203.

as a source of empowerment and legitimacy from which to contest the depletion of forest resources. The forest has been linked to femininity for centuries in India's history through the worship of Aranyani, the goddess of the forest who is the provider of life and fertility.³⁹ In describing the Indian conception of forests, Vandana Shiva states that forests:

“as a source of life, [were] venerated as sacred and human evolution was measured in terms of man's capacity to merge with her rhythms and patterns of intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. The forest thus nurtured an ecological civilization in the most fundamental sense of harmony with nature...The forest as the highest expression of the earth's fertility and productivity is symbolized in yet another form as the Earth Mother.”⁴⁰

The conceptual ties between peaceful femininity and nurturing Mother Nature provide a strong foundation upon which to embrace peaceful methods of protest advocating harmonious relations with nature. While it was taboo for women in the hill societies to voice political opinions, the seemingly natural bonds between women and nature legitimated their involvement and served as an entry point for women to join the discussion.⁴¹ Women's involvement in the 1970s and 1980s was facilitated by the fact that three hundred years ago, Indian women had also clung to trees in order to prevent their being cut down.⁴² Interestingly, when Chipko was proposed as a method of peaceful protest, it was the hill women who gravitated toward it and who were the majority of the participants.

While enabling women to engage in resource struggles, these conceptual ideas also serve as useful guidelines providing moral sanctions for the treatment of the earth.⁴³ Some of the women in the movement were evidently aware of the strategic advantage they had as a result of traditional nature-women connections. Framing the issue within traditional

³⁹ Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 55.

⁴⁰ Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 56.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 67.

⁴³ Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, 29.

femininity was a particularly effective way of approaching the loggers and the government. One woman, for example, stood between the loggers and the forest and “challenged the men to shoot her instead of cutting down the trees, comparing the forest with her mother’s home.”⁴⁴ This type of framing, often necessary in resource debates, parallels the Clayoquot Sound protests in 1993 in B.C., Canada where the activists compared the trees to nurturing mothers.⁴⁵ The politicization of concerned grandmothers in the Clayoquot protests also parallels women’s appeal to feminine legitimacy in the Chipko movement.

By embracing organic conceptions of Mother Nature, the hill women were able to voice their opinions about this important political, economic and ecological issue, therefore taking steps toward overcoming the existing patriarchal social structure that had previously silenced them.⁴⁶ They were successful in stopping government-contracted logging on a number of occasions and demanded fundamental changes in the resource policies in the area.⁴⁷ From a cultural ecofeminist perspective, this movement demonstrates that the conceptual links between femininity and nature may actually serve to liberate both women and the environment. Women’s conceptions of nature should therefore be seriously considered in resource-related discourses, as they are useful in establishing harmonious, egalitarian relations with nature and providing legitimacy for resource preservation movements. Furthermore, traditional conceptions of “feminine” nature may serve to involve women in political resource issues to which they normally would not have access.

Conclusion

The Chipko forest-based resource movement provides a thought-provoking illustration of the gendered nature of resource conflicts. Although often overlooked, the men

⁴⁴ Jain, 171.

⁴⁵ William Chaloupka, “There Must Be Some Way Out of Here: Strategy, Ethics and Environmental Politics” in *A Political Space: Reading the Global through Clayoquot Sound*, ed. Warren Magnusson and Karena Shaw (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003), 82-83.

⁴⁶ Shiva, *Staying Alive*.

⁴⁷ Jain, 169, 170.

and women of the Himalayan hills used different methods of gaining legitimacy, had separate ways of mobilizing, and held distinct opinions about the use and intrinsic value of their trees. Cultural ecofeminism is a useful framework for understanding the movement since it recognizes this group of women's unique experience with and perspective on nature. These differences are not necessarily innate but are, in fact, based upon the gendered division of labour, access to formal political institutions, and traditional beliefs. By highlighting the experiences of these women, it becomes clear that existing frameworks for understanding resource use and environmental movements are often male-normative (rather than gender-neutral). The gendered nature of resource conflicts should therefore be recognized within relevant discourses. Rather than homogenizing women, this insight may be applied appropriately within specific contexts. This may ultimately prove useful in working toward gender equality and sustainable relations with nature.

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