Ecofeminism in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Introduction

Since 'eco-feminism' was developed as a concept in the 1970s[i], there have been, arguably, major policy shifts in the fields of gender (in)equality and environmental sustainability which warrant a consideration of the achievements of, and work outstanding for ecological feminism. This paper will assess the changing policy landscape to explore the extent to which this has structurally altered gender inequalities and societies' treatment of the environment, and the imbrication of these two processes. In order to do so, I will look at the rising profile of gender mainstreaming at the international, European Union[ii] and European national level; the application of the 'feminism' debate to environmental concerns; and the shifting of the 'radical edge' of eco-feminism, to explore future possible trajectories (see, for example, the work of Val Plumwood (2003) and Joni Seager (2003)). To some extent, I will suggest that the transformation of policy and development rhetoric to include *gender* (itself, arguably, a 'post-feminist' dilution of women's equality) masks a fundamental attachment to 'business-as-usual' where social roles, pay differentials, political representation and environmental degradation remain little changed. However, there is, I argue, sufficient evidence to identify the influence of eco-feminist thinking on major policy initiatives concerning the relationship between women, men and environment.

The central question, then, of this paper is whether eco-feminism (as a distinct discourse, or as an amalgam of feminism and environmentalism constructed in

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different times and places in different ways) has changed the way in which Western society constructs the relationship between men, women and the environment. This, of course, is a problematic and speculative exercise and will follow from an analysis of how discourse and practice themselves have changed.

This paper will consider key changes to gender equality as it is linked to environmental sustainability, and explore how women's/feminists' interests have helped to shape the environmental debate in the past decade. I will try to unpick dominant discourses which, on the one hand are beginning to 'naturalize' (some would say neutralize) environmental concerns (where the terms sustainable development and environmental sustainability are common currency but poorly understood to the point of being anodyne), but on the other marginalizing feminism, to examine the impact of this on 'eco-feminism'. Finally, I will explore the territory of eco-feminism's leading/radical edge to speculate on where this may take both conceptual understanding and policy in the future. First, however, to put this discussion into context, I will briefly review eco-feminist arguments to illustrate their range, before focusing on the constructivist approach, which has had the most traction in gender/environment debates in the last two decades.

Eco-feminist approaches

It is tempting to use a retrospective to try to impose some sort of order on past intellectual activity and what I am attempting to do first in this article is to explore whether there is an intellectual trajectory, through a not necessarily coherent body of thinking and writing on gender and environment in the late 20th century. In teasing out the possible relationship between women's position, gender relations, feminism, and the way in which Western society is seeking to control or manage the environment, eco-feminist writers in the 1970s and 1980s explored the relative importance of essentialism and social construction in these relationships.

The social constructivist analyses (which tended to dominate French and British writing, see, for example, Mary Mellor, 1992) drew from the Marxist and social feminist literature to show how women's position in society (as, for example, carers of children and other vulnerable family members, domestic workers, and low paid/status workers) derived from prevailing social and economic structures, which exposed them to a particular set of environmental incivilities. The specifically eco-feminist argument here proposed that, since the same social and economic structures also produced wide scale environmental damage, then women could, in some sense, 'share' this experience and were therefore better placed to argue on nature's behalf.

The essentialist argument that underpinned some of the North American and Australian analyses proposed that women had a particular relationship with nature by virtue of their biology (predominantly as actual or potential child bearers) and that this proximity to nature qualified them to speak more eloquently on nature's behalf. (See, for example, Charlene Spretnak, 1990 and Mary Daly, 1978.) Different authors drew on each position to different degrees, and much of the critique of eco-feminism (well articulated by Janet Biehl, 1991) over the past twenty years has focused on the problems perceived with essentialism, and on the validity of a shared experience between the human and non-human.

Dennis Smith (2001), in discussing the role of gender in peace and conflict, has argued that essentialism is often used as a tool to mobilize a group around a perceived characteristic which sets it apart, and certainly, cultural eco-feminism (prioritizing essentialist arguments) did so. Its strength was to demonstrate the possibility of a way of thinking and being which reversed the normal hierarchy in which men stood at the peak; however, little academic feminist environmental

thinking is currently framed in this way. Indeed, as Gillian Rose (1993) noted, to accept that women had an irreducible 'female essence' would be tantamount to admitting that others distinguished by 'difference' (such as minority ethnic populations, disabled people or gay men and women, and men more widely) could be driven to behave in similarly 'essential' ways, which, by definition, would be unchanging and unchangeable, an argument that social scientists have been working hard to refute for many years.

The argument that informs this paper is based on an interpretation of eco-feminism that is constructivist and it is certainly this strand that appears to have informed policy development over the past twenty years.

Changes in the Environmental Discourse: Policy

By 2001, a paper in the Journal of Gender Studies was taking as axiomatic that governments throughout the world were beginning to focus more attention on the subject of gender equality (Bhattar, 2001:17). The following reviews the extent to which, mainly inter/transnational policy has accomplished this transition, whilst Table 1 illustrates how both environmental policy and women's equality policy have been dialectically affected by each other.

Table 1: Strategies for Linking Women & Environment

Bringing gender into the environment	Bringing the environment into gender
1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development	1995 United Nations 4th Conference on Women and Platform of Action
2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development	
EU Gender Mainstreaming DGXI	

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Environmental Justice movement	

One practice that has become much more widely embedded at national/international level from the early 1990s is gender mainstreaming[iii]. Framed within human rights and equality discourses that have informed the United Nations (UN), it has become a plank of all UN conventions since the environment and women's conferences of the early-mid 1990s. Jointly, the outcomes of these two conferences (shown in Table 1) have promoted the inclusion of environmental impacts and women's interests in other UN agreements, such as those concerning Habitat, Social Inclusion and Poverty. Whilst, arguably, the national machineries of the signatory states of these conventions are necessary as catalysts for promoting gender equality and justice, those same state structures are embedded in structural inequalities and it is sometimes difficult to see how they may be used to make anything other than superficial changes (Rai, 2003). Molyneaux (1998) distinguishes between women's 'practical' and 'strategic' needs, whereby addressing such 'practical' needs as better childcare (or, in environmental terms, reducing nitrogen dioxide or particulate pollution as a contributor to childhood asthma) does nothing to challenge existing power structures. However, strategic interests (such as challenging a society which values the macho image of much car driving/ownership) take on existing patriarchal 'paradigms of power'. Rai argues that an effective way of gender mainstreaming would be to frame women's interests (both practical and strategic) in the wider interests of a just society rather than the commonly adopted additive nature of gender analysis.

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 was the first UN conference to be significantly informed by the non-governmental sector. Its centrepiece (or at least, the element that achieved the most publicity, and was least

scathed by the Rio +5 evaluation, see Osborn and Bigg, 1998), Agenda 21, was a testament to the sustained lobbying by women's groups (as part of a wider NGO presence, and local government). The preparatory meetings took place across the globe for two years and ensured a reasonably coherent lobby from the women/environment movement worldwide, leading to the inclusion of a set of objectives defined in Chapter 24 'Global action for women towards sustainable development and equitable action'. (United Nations, 1992.)

The link between women and the environment was consolidated, internationally, at the 1995 4th United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing. The resulting Platform for Action identified 'Women and Environment' as one of the critical areas of concern. UNED-UK's 'Gender 21' group subdivided this concern into: education; health; marginalised groups; planning, housing and transport; Local Agenda 21 and consumption and waste (UNED-UK, 1997).

Ten years later, the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) did little to advance women's equality with respect to the environment, although the need to embed women's (or sometimes termed, gendered) concerns was written more thoroughly into the Plan of Implementation. Few achievements had been noted in the intervening 10 years, for example, the UN had expressed frustration at the lack of progress on issues as wide as AIDS/HIV, globalization, poverty, and health – all of which are distinguished by a gender dimension.

Point 20 of The Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development commits to ensuring that "women's empowerment and emancipation, and gender equality are integrated in all activities encompassed within Agenda 21, The Millennium Development Goals and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation". This plan variously refers to women, females, women and men, and gender, both generally (as in "the outcomes of the summit should benefit all, including women..."), and with

reference to specific programmes. Such programmes include good governance (item 4), poverty eradication (item 6), eliminating violence (6), discrimination (6), health (6,46, 47), economic opportunity (6), land ownership (10a), water (24), agriculture (38f), technology (49), energy (49) and area specific programmes such as mountain areas and Africa (40c, 56). It also embeds gender considerations into the means of implementing the Plan, such as education, data collection, indicator provision, public participation and decision making. Such a thorough weaving of gender/women throughout the Plan for Implementation is, in some ways, an improvement on the targeted Chapter 24 focusing on women in Agenda 21, but it is too soon to establish whether it will have any effect on signatory states' treatment of women, particularly in relation to the environment. Participants in the Women's Platform at the NGO Forum at WSSD had mixed reactions: both welcoming a more thoroughly embedded inclusion of women in plans (WEDO, 2002) and exasperation at the assumption in the main conference that 'women's issues' had already been dealt with at Rio (WEN, European Group, 2002). There is some evidence that the women's groups were right to be suspicious as, in preparation for the WSSD, the UN Commission for Sustainable Development, in its own preparatory committee, identified the participation of women at all political levels as "still relatively low, and the level of participation at the international level is not adequately geographically balanced or adequately financed". (UN Economic and Social Council, 2002:43.)

Gender mainstreaming

On the basis of the women's groups involved in submitting evidence to the United Nations preparatory committees, it could be argued that the inputs into the UNCED and Beijing conferences were influenced by the eco-feminist debates from the 1980s onwards. As such, it is possible to see how constructivist eco-feminism has been incorporated into policy governing gender relations, environment, and the linking of women and environment. One of these outcomes is 'gender mainstreaming'.

The United Nations pioneered 'gender mainstreaming' which requested signatories of the 4th World Conference on Women "to mainstream a gender perspective into all policies and programmes, so that, before decisions are taken, an analysis is made of the effects on women and men"(United Nations, 1995). Nanavaty (2001) reports gains at this level and makes recommendations as to how to achieve the attitude shift which will enable this. The European Union accepted the principle of gender mainstreaming in 1996 and this has been formalised in the Treaty of Amsterdam, which commits member states to the "elimination of inequalities and the promotion of equality between women and men." (European Union, 1997.) For example, a recent investigation of the gendered impact of waste management practice[iv] in selected European Union member states illustrates the scope for this and the limited amount of good practice that is beginning to emerge (see Buckingham et al, forthcoming), although it is also clear that the European Union commitment, and subsequent UK commitment to gender mainstreaming through the Women and Equality Unit (1998) is not filtering down to the local level of waste management in anything but a piecemeal fashion.

The World Bank has identified practical reasons, consistent with its aims and practices, for incorporating gender equality into its programmes. "Gender is an issue of development effectiveness, not just a matter of political correctness or kindness to women. Evidence demonstrates that when women and men are relatively equal, economies tend to grow faster, the poor move more quickly out of poverty and the well being of men, women and children is enhanced." (World Bank, 2002.)

Whilst most policy makers would not challenge these aims, eco-feminists do question the validity of pursuing economic growth, as much of this is likely to produce negative impacts on the environment. Their argument (see, for example,

Mellor, 1992, Merchant, 1996, Plumwood, 1993) rests on changing our priorities whereby we may be driven more by quality of life issues, and that it is redistribution that should be at the heart of policy, rather than generating more growth. Eco-feminist literature suggests that women might be better able than men to effect this change, and that, therefore, it is not just a matter of equality within existing structures, but of changing the structures to reflect this mode of thinking, a point that will be developed when considering future trajectories of eco-feminism. Bhattar (2001) argues that gender mainstreaming, since the 1980s, has sought to integrate gender concerns as part of 'business as usual', and that part of this approach has been to raise the number of female appointments to decision making posts. Her reservations on this procedure are that this only works if women are able to "fundamentally re-orient the nature of the mainstream" (2001:22), which requires all policy makers to accept that there are "fundamental differences in the experience and interpretation of reality between women and men" (2001:22). Unless policy makers are aware of this in advance, no amount of gender mainstreaming initiatives will make any difference. She argues that a 'critical mass' of women is needed in decision making fora to create the possibility for women to support each other in policy initiatives, to be a catalyst for other women to be involved and to be in a position to allocate and control resources. A consensus seems to accumulate around a 30% to 35% minimum ratio of women to men to create critical mass (see also Dahlerup, 1988; UNDAW, PRIO, 1996).

Changes in Environmental Discourse: Environmental protest
Rai (2003) argues that civil society (specifically women's groups) is essential to strengthen the resolve of government to gender mainstream, and to hold it to account. The degree to which any government is open to civil society scrutiny will determine the effectiveness of policy monitoring. Indeed, as the above discussion

shows, the global environmental debate has recognized the importance of enabling women and men to participate meaningfully in environmental policy formation and decision making through civil society structures, as well as through more formal representative structures. Such participation requires the means to access information which, in the third world, means eliminating inequalities in education from primary level. At present, the global adult literacy rate for men is 85%, whilst that for women is 74% (UN, ESC, 2002).

Public participation usually relates to forms of democratic challenge which are formalized and structured in relation to state decision making structures. Less formal expressions of political protest emerge when these formalized structures of participation are found wanting – when fundamental breaches of 'natural justice' are as much the result of governing structures as their neglect. Such protests are more likely to be organized by women, themselves on the margins of formal decision making, and this has characterized the grass roots environmental movement in disparate geographical locations. The early eco-feminist literature canonized 'movements' such as the Chipco in Himalayan India, The Green Belt in Kenya, Love Canal in New York State and drew attention to the role of women in dramatizing the links between environmental damage, the human impacts of this, women's relative lack of power and the strategies this lack of power has necessitated. (See, respectively, Mies and Shiva 1993; Dankleman and Davidson, 1988; Gibbs, 1998). Wickramasinghe links the conceptual and practical aspects of eco-feminism in her work in South Asia, arguing that this region, particularly in rural areas, has been at the centre of eco-feminism and that this has helped women conceptualise the links between women and the environment. These inequalities – the gender gaps in education, and the distribution of rural work – have not been eased by "development [but have been] re-endorsed in newly created development paradigms" (Wickramasinghe, 2002: 230).

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What such movements lack in terms of financial resources, they make up for in imagination and commitment and social cohesion. Indeed, Seager (2003) claims that "at its best, feminist environmentalism rocks boats" in a variety of policy and philosophical areas (p167). It combines theory and activism to "challenge and redefine foundational principles" (p167). In the United Kingdom, the Women's Environmental Network, founded to counter what was seen as a masculinist bias in environmental campaigning[v], has taken on issues that particularly affect women in attention grabbing campaigns such as 'Getting Lippy' (investigating chemically toxic ingredients in cosmetics), 'Real Nappies' (promoting the use of cloth nappies to reduce the 8 million disposable nappies that are discarded, mostly to landfill, each day) and Chocolate (raising awareness of the toxic pesticide residues of lindane which still exist in some non organic chocolate bars).

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Whilst the link between poverty and women is not explicitly made, WEN's work is founded on the understanding that women are not well placed to argue within business or government and this has been borne out through several public battles with advertisers. Both the establishment of WEN in 1988 and its current practice is informed by eco-feminism, which, through WEN's increasingly ought after policy advisory role, is indirectly finding its way into some UK government policy. In some ways, the example of WEN, illustrates the scope for more radical protest finding its way into public policy several years down the line. Their waste minimization campaign demonstrates this as well, as WEN is now called to advise central government and local authorities, and has made a significant corrective input in to the Greater London Authority's Waste Plan. The challenge for WEN, as a multi-issue campaigning organization is to combine working at the more radical eco-

feminist edge, raising issues of salience to women, and often ignored in other policy fora, whilst retaining an ability to have an input into government policy. This apparent conflict of balancing the radical and incorporation is well explored by Neil Carter (2001) with regard to the environmental movement more widely.

<u>Future trajectories for eco-feminism</u>

Environmental justice

The environmental justice movement has grown in scope over the past two decades, emerging primarily from analyses of environmental inequalities based on race/ethnicity and poverty. Whilst eco-feminism has not claimed to be part of this, it clearly shares a number of its characteristics, not least, the fact that from the micro to the macro level, women are more likely than men to be classified as 'in poverty' the world over. The environmental justice literature, previously dominated by poverty and race issues, is just beginning to address gender. This is timely since there is accumulating evidence that gender is disproportionately associated with disadvantage in a number of ways. An Equal Opportunities Commission funded report recently found that even when controlling for factors such as labour market status, age and number of children, household composition, and age, there was still a clear gender dimension to poverty, and that women who are single pensioners, unemployed, of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin, teenage householders and/or tenants, are more likely than men with the same characteristics to be poor (Bradshaw et al, 2003). Such disadvantage has an impact on the extent to which these women are trapped in poor quality environments. It is also noticeable how women, compared to men, are disproportionately disadvantaged in both chronic and catastrophic environmental hazard situations. Fordham (2003) identifies how this is both as a direct result of the hazard, for example, in the 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh which killed almost 140,000 people, 90% of the victims were women and children, or indirectly. Here Fordham considers violence against women which increases in high

stress situations, both in environmental catastrophes and chronically environmentally stressed situations, but which is largely ignored in the male dominated field of disaster management and development.

Much of the eco-feminism literature refers to 'embodiedment' – or how women's bodies are particularly vulnerable to environmental pollution (see, for example, Mellor,1992; Salleh, 1997), and yet historically, safe chemical loads have tended to be calculated on the basis of men's body tolerance to exposure over an eight hour period (i.e. work time). New European legislation (such as REACH - The European Registration and Evaluation Authority for the Restriction of Chemicals) and recent publications, are beginning to draw attention to the vulnerability of pregnant women (EEA, 2003), women more generally (EU) and women at different stages of their life cycle such as at puberty and menopause (Corra, in WEN, 2003). However, there are still relatively few instances of such recognition in the actual legislation. There is, consequently, significant scope to develop an environmental justice case along the lines that women are more vulnerable to toxic exposure both due to their social roles, which are more likely to consign them to poverty than men, and their biology. Recent publications on environmental justice (see, for example, Agyeman, Bullard and Evans, 2002) are beginning to incorporate concerns about women into their analyses, and, more particularly, groups of women who are additionally marginalized by their income, occupation, ethnicity or disability. This is an important inclusion given that environmental justice issues are becoming more widely heard and argued in North America and Europe.

Non-human others

In 2003, two feminist/environmentalist writers published on the extension of feminist/environmental concerns into animal rights. Joni Seager argued that a shared structure of oppression, a feminist analysis of allocation of rights and gendered

assumptions about the relationship between human and non-human species underpinned both eco-feminism and animal rights. (Seager, 2003.) Seager goes further to suggest that both concerns share the problem of being consigned to a dualistic 'other' that, in reality, is more of a continuum (see also Haraway, 2000). Such extensions of feminist/environmentalist concerns reach into debates into food production systems and recreational activities such as hunting, both of which can be enriched, she argues, by an eco-feminist perspective.

Likewise, Val Plumwood, who, in the 1990s argued for a dissolution of the dualistic way of seeing men and women (Plumwood, 1993), has extended this analysis to argue for a new 'inter-species' ethic as the only way in which to avert what she sees as an ecological crisis, born of human hubris, sado-dispassion, rationality and a dualistic culture which has separated 'Nature' and 'Culture' in the West. Plumwood sees what/who she describes as the "Hero of Reason" (2003:21) as responsible for the "sado-dispassionate…cultural drama of reason and nature [unfolding to] choke the life from his planetary partner in his final sadistic act of mastery." (p22) Her aim is to provide "recipes for escaping [this] situation" (p36) and she uses most of the book to critique not only industrial and post-industrial approaches to the Earth and to what she variously refers to as Earth Others, supra-human, non-human and more-than-human (as alternative descriptors for life which is not classified as human), but also other spiritual traditions and approaches of deep ecology.

Conclusions

The relationship of the leading, or radical edge of any movement to the state is complex and increasingly well theorised (see, for example, Carter, 2001 Rootes, 2001 on trading off radical action with incorporation). With regard to gender, Rai (2003) argues that, whilst it is important to work within the state, such a strategy cannot be used exclusively, as the radical edge identifies the future, possibly,

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currently less politically acceptable challenges. This 'radical edge' has, I would argue, a particular salience with regard to environmental feminism, as protest and community politics is sometimes seen as the only way in which women, as a minority in decision making arenas, can make their voice heard. This is as true within the academy (where both women, and feminist studies of one sort or another, are marginalized) as beyond.

In looking back, then, over the past thirty years of eco-feminism, I would argue that significant strides have been made to incorporate women's and gender issues within certain policy areas and both the global and the local level. The evidence for this, where this exists, lies in the campaigning groups who have informed international agreements and local practice. This is, of course, particularly so where the aims of these groups have coincided with the practical aims of international and aid agencies (such as Oxfam or the World Bank). However, real obstacles remain in making structural changes to social systems to ensure that equality and feminist concerns are routinely part of environmental decision making and eco-feminist theoreticians and activists continue to expose these concerns.

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[i] Eco-feminism as a neologism was conceived by Francoise D'Eubonne to signify the conjoining of radical ecological and feminist thinking in a variety of perspectives which sought to eliminate gender inequalities and hierarchies in a way that valued the environment, and articulated parallels between women's and environmental exploitation.

[ii] The reason for focusing on EU and its member states is twofold: firstly, EU policy has been committed to gender mainstreaming for 8 years, which gives a certain perspective from which toconsider its efficacy; secondly, the author's own research is focused on Europe, and specifically on gender mainstreaming in environmental policy.

[iii] UN DAW has defined this as "the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy of making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality". (in Shirin Rai, 2003)

[iv] Study into Gender-Differentiated Impacts of Municipal Waste Management Planning in the EU fro The Commission of the European Communities, Directorate General Environment ENV A Contract: B4-3040/2002/343154/MAR/A2

[v] For details about WEN contact info@wen.org.uk