Women and Sustainability
What Kind of Theory Do We Need?

ALLISON GOEBEL

Utilisant le matériel d'une recherche au Zimbabwe, l'auteure considère que certaines approches éco-féministes font problème alors que l'approche écolo-politique dans un contexte culturel idéologique et institutionnel est de loin le guide le plus utile à la recherche.

When I saw the call for papers for this special volume on "Women and Sustainability," my first thought was to write something interrogating the preoccupations of western feminist environmentalism, especially the eco-feminist varieties. Particularly with the subtitle "From Rio de Janeiro (1992) to Johannesburg (2002)," surely the particularities of southern women's experiences must be allowed to disrupt western theorizing, much of which has tended to generalize relationships and values in regards to "women and the environment." In my work on gender, land, and environment in Southern Africa, I have learned that assuming a "special link" between women and the environment, either on a spiritual level or in terms of seeing women as "caretakers" of the environment distorts the lived realities of women.

In this essay I provide a brief historical overview of the various approaches to women, gender and environments in Africa, and using evidence from Zimbabwe, argue for the importance of field-based empirical research as the basis of theory building. The theoretical tools of feminist political ecology emerge as particularly useful in this regard.

Women, Environment and Development: The 1980s.

The environment has been a major preoccupation of development-oriented research and practice in Africa for more than two decades. The United Nations led processes that produced *Our Common Future* in 1987 (WCED), and the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 had birthed the concept of "sustainable development" which fast became the predominant development paradigm of the 1990s. The 1980s also saw widespread western feminist engagement with environmental issues and theory, including among researchers, activists, and practitioners involved in development studies and practice (Braidotti et al; Steady; Häusler). An approach to women, gender, and development (sometimes labelled "women, environment and development" [WED]), became important in development institutions in the '90s (Braidotti et al.; Harcourt; Alaimo; Jackson; Joekes et al.; Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter and Wangari; Sturgeon). Early WED in Africa was concerned with environmentally-related subsistence crises such as fuel wood shortages, desertification, and soil erosion that differentially affected rural women (Sontheimer; Dankelman and Davidson 1988). The discourse was above all concerned with the implications of environmental degradation as a "livelihood crisis" (Collins 35). WED focused on women's relationships with the environment as users, managers, and primary victims of environmental deterioration, emphasizing productive systems, and the social roles and relationships that make women's relationship to the environment different than that of men's. Women's roles as subsistence farmers, as gatherers of forest products, and managers of home gardens and the trees in them, make women crucial actors in contexts of environmental degradation, reclamation and sustainable use (Agarwal and Narain, 1985; Collins, 1991; Dankelman and Davidson 1988, 1991; Davidson; Sontheimer). At the same time, systems of gender inequality confound or prevent women's attempts to meet subsistence needs or manage resources sustainably. The literature of the period sought both to make women's roles visible to policy makers and hence make policy more likely to succeed, and to promote greater gender equity for women. Although the work often challenged land distribution and use practices, it on the whole neither essentialized a relationship between women and the environment, nor challenged a focus on improving productive systems. Improvements, however, should be fairer to women, and environmentally "sustainable."

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Feminists have critiqued this approach by suggesting that it takes for granted women's labour and time in extra activities to "save" the environment, and fails to recognize that women's interests are not always compatible with environmental preservation (Joekes et al.). Overall, this instrumental view of women and the environment tells us very little new about women or gender. Women emerge as a homogenous category characterized only by their victimhood in inequitable gender systems and environmental contexts of deterioration.[1] The critiques propose that the relationship between women and natural resources is an empirical question in each specific context, and must be investigated rather than assumed. Further, focusing on gender ideologies and relations rather than on "women" as a category, better addresses the diversity, complexity, and dynamism of women's lives, and allows for attention to the roles of men in the analysis (Leach and Green). Attention must also be given to other relevant contextual issues such as Indigenous use patterns, property rights, and the total system of livelihoods (Jackson; Rocheleau et al.). It is out of these critiques that the feminist political ecology approach developed. I pursue this approach below.

Although WED work has focused predominantly on the material issues of survival in contexts of environmental deterioration, it has also been associated with some cultural and spiritual elements of ecofeminism. As Leach and Green point out, this association with ecofeminism has come mostly through the work of Vandana Shiva (1988, 1989; and Shiva and Mies), and the international networking of scholars, development workers, and activists that brought together the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) in the lead up to the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (Leach and Green).[2] Ecofeminism is largely a western phenomenon, of which there are a number of strands. These embrace a large spectrum of theoretical positions from cultural feminism and Goddess spirituality, to socialist and materialist positions (King). Discussion of this complex field, which has enjoyed wide-ranging debate and development in the last 15 years, is beyond the scope of this paper.[3] The focus here is to identify the elements of ecofeminism that have informed (either implicitly or explicitly) some WED thinking and practice, and assess their usefulness for building theory and research tools for Southern Africa.

Even if women's connection with nature is posed as a social construction in a particular historical time, posing such a relationship homogenizes "women's position" globally.

Shiva critiqued western culture, colonialism, and capitalism as the basis of the global environmental crisis both in the North and the South (Shiva 1988; Shiva and Mies). Shiva suggests that dualistic thinking that posits "man" as separate from "nature" and hence able to dominate and control it, has led to a belief in unlimited productive expansion, and in the ability of technology to repair any damage done to the environment. The same dualistic thinking underpins the dichotomous gender system that promotes male domination and control and equates women with nature. Shiva, consistent with many eco-feminists on the cultural end of the field, therefore stresses a relationship between patriarchy and environmental destruction, between the oppression of women and ecological disaster. Given this shared position of oppression between women and the earth, and women's association with life-giving and conserving work, women are conceived as having a "privileged epistemological approach to nature" (Littig 133)—a better understanding of both what is wrong with human/environment relations and how to promote positive change. Women's protests against environmental destruction and their knowledge about environmentally-healthy practices are a key focus of an eco-feminist WED perspective. Shiva associates Indigenous women's revolt against environmentally destructive practices, such as women in the Chipko movement in India[4] with a "feminine principle" which taps into the epistemic privilege that women presumably have (1990: 200). These ideas remain implicit in the post-Earth Summit international activist climate. A recent book collecting stories of women's environmental activism around the planet notes that environmental problems

> ... are the result of social and political systems that are patriarchal, hierarchical and competitive.... Women are working to make the world a fundamentally different place, a healthy place, a world devoted to sustaining life not destroying it. (Wyman 20)

Perhaps the most consistent aspect of feminist critiques of eco-feminist inspired WED approaches, such as Shiva's, concerns the apparent essentialism of positing women as inherently closer to nature than men, and as the holders of privileged knowledge about healthy human/environment relations (Agarwal; Jackson; Joekes et al.; Leach and Green). In the first place, many feminists are loath to embrace a "natural" link between women and nature, given the centrality of the concept of the social construction of gender to west-

ern feminist theory and politics. Embracing a notion of women as closer to nature appears to embrace the very oppressive and dualistic culture and economy that western feminism has critiqued and attempted to transform. The eco-feminist literature has dealt extensively with these charges (see King; Carlassare 1994, 1999). Ariel Salleh argues that the closeness of women to the environment globally is not an essentialist construct, but an "historical accident," a product of their social position (6). And while both men and women are "close" to nature, being a part of it, attaining the prize of masculine identity depends on men distancing themselves from that fact. Eco-feminists explore the political consequences of this culturally elaborated gender difference (Salleh). Nevertheless, opponents to eco-feminist perspectives insist that even if women's connection with nature is posed as a social construction in a particular historical time, posing such a relationship in general and global terms generalizes and homogenizes "women's position" globally.

Feminists opposed to generalized constructions of a woman/nature link, cite cross-cultural evidence that suggests that a closer link—either physically or ideologically—between women and nature does not hold true across different contexts. One theorist points out that the connection of women and nature and a dominating ideology towards nature does not exist in Chinese culture (Li). Melissa Leach's interesting study of the Mende in the Gola forest of Sierra Leone makes a similar point: the Mende associate certain aspects of the environment with men (such as "bush"), and others with women (such as fishing grounds). The Mende do not associate culture with men and nature with women nor do they conceive of a culture/nature divide. Overall, Leach calls for culturally and location specific analysis of women, gender and the environment, as well as of "Nature" itself. Leach also suggests that an ecologically friendly cosmology can coexist with unsustainable practices in real life. Population pressure, social hierarchies, and economic necessity can lead to disjunctures between ideologies and practices. Finally, a study of the Kogi people in Columbia points out that a Mother-creator cosmology that appears female-positive, can co-exist with practical relations of patriarchy and subordination of "real" women (Dodd).

Indeed, my own evidence from Zimbabwe supports these anti-essentialist critiques. With a history of one of central Africa's territorial cults (Schoffeleers), "traditional"[5] Shona religion has some profoundly ecological elements, including rules regarding the care of woodlands, wetlands and arable fields (Nhira and Fortmann; Goebel 1998). However, Shona religion is also associated with hierarchical social relations with often negative environmental consequences, such as the unsustainable exploitation of resources by local elites who have put the resources under "traditional protection" (Mukamuri). It is also fundamentally patriarchal in ways that distance women from the environment both in terms of rights and ideology. For example, Shona religion includes a division of labour among paternal and maternal ancestors. Paternal ancestors, particularly of the ruling lineage, are associated with environmental care and management, while maternal ancestors are seen as taking care of social and physical health, and of issues such as fertility and nurturing (Mutambirwa; see also Lan). Thus, when people are concerned about environmental issues such as drought, soil fertility, and deforestation, the "traditional" religious implication is to turn to patrilineal ancestors, particularly those of the ruling lineage. My research has shown that the deployment of traditional beliefs and practices are key in the production of gender relations that underpin women's secondary relation to land and natural resources. For example, the most common explanation for recurrent drought was the failure to perform the proper ceremonies of ancestral appeasement of the patrilineal ancestors of the ruling lineage of the area. Thus women are distanced culturally from environmental management. More concretely, patrilineal order and patrilocal practices promoted by "traditional" religion such as assigning primary rights to land only to men continue to legitimate and ensure women's secondary status in relation to land and resources. The family rituals of ancestor appeasement endure, and emphasize male closeness to land as well as patrilineal inheritance patterns. One example is the ritual done about a year after a male head of household has passed away, which is designed to bring home, or settle the spirit of the man in the area as a resident ancestral spirit who will provide protection for the family. This ritual is not normally done for women. In this cultural context wherein men are associated with land in both the human and the spirit worlds, women are distanced from land.

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On the whole, research in many contexts does not support a generalized view of women as "closer" to nature, either practically or ideologically, nor simply its mirror opposite. Hence Shiva's theory of a special "feminine prin-

ciple" that associates women with environmentally healthy practices and knowledge, and Salleh's identification of "one unique vantage point" (33) for women in relation to environmental destruction may block rather than facilitate understanding and investigation of different specific contexts.

A second major problem identified in Shiva's approach is the invocation of ahistorical accounts of a pre-industrial era of harmony between both men and women and people and nature (Leach and Green). Many development thinkers will be open to Shiva's critique of "developmentalism" which privileges the goals of economic growth and modern western institutional systems. These goals may be neither ecologically possible for the whole world, nor socially desirable. Instead Shiva promotes a "subsistence perspective" that challenges western definitions of poverty and its cure (development), and elevates indigenous practices of subsistence and survival (1990: 197). Indigenous knowledge and practices are clearly crucial in the search for sustainability. (Scoones and Thompson). However, invoking Indigenous, pre-industrial practices and social arrangements uncritically, as "wholesome, sustainable lifestyles" (Shiva 1990: 197), and without careful historical analysis of the inequalities (including those of gender) in those systems can be very dangerous for women. This is particularly so in contexts such as modern day Zimbabwe, where appeals to "culture" and "tradition" are being used to justify continued, and at times deepened, subordination of women (McFadden; Goebel forthcoming).

Despite these problems, the early WED approaches, including ecofeminist varieties, have been important in their general insistence on linking gender and the environment in the analysis of social systems. The outpouring of feminist writing on the environment has certainly helped to bring attention to the environment as important to feminist and development issues.

From WED to Feminist Political Ecology: The 1990s.

By the late 1990s, several excellent volumes of case studies had been published, boosting feminist theorizing.[6] Most of this work steered clear of eco-feminist approaches for the reasons already outlined, building instead on the earlier approaches that emphasized livelihood issues and field research. This work has developed into a feminist political ecology approach that points out the specificity and complexity of women's relationships to their environments in different contexts. This specificity and complexity argues strongly against broad generalizations (Zein-Elabdin). Nevertheless, some empirical trends are identifiable and theoretical concepts based on this research began to be developed and used. One key theme is the framing of the analysis within a macro-level and historical understanding of globalization and colonization. Issues of land and environment in Zimbabwe, for example, cannot be understood without analysis of British colonialism, which bequeathed inequitable land distribution patterns, and has led to the current crisis of land invasions and looming domestic economic collapse (Bond and Manyanya; Marongwe; Worby; Goebel forthcoming). The research challenge is to map these broad macro level forces without allowing them to over determine the micro level picture (Rocheleau et al.). This approach allows generalization without homogenisation, a move that is possible only because of commitment to empirical research of specific contexts. It is this attention to case studies that makes it more useful than most of the earlier theorizing.

A second theme is a micro level focus on local institutions. This focus is very useful in the study of the micro context in rural Zimbabwe (i.e., Nhira; Nhira and Fortmann; Scoones and Matose). Micro level relations of power, including those of age, clan, lineage, and gender, are created, reinforced, and played out in key ways at the level of local institutions. In rural Zimbabwe, for example, the institutions involved in environmental management involve both state sponsored and "traditional" institutions. Both types of institutions are male dominated which works to reinforce the secondary nature of women's relationship to arable land and other environmental resources, and means that women are more "users" than "managers" in this particular management system.

Another key institutional issue highlighted by feminist political ecologists, is the way in which marriage tends to mediate women's rights to natural resources. This dynamic plays a strong role in the creation of gender relations in rural Zimbabwe (Fortmann and Nabane; Nhira and Fortmann). My own research bears out the centrality of marriage in the formation of gendered relations to the environment. Women in resettlement areas gain access to resettlement land primarily through marriage (Goebel). They are vulnerable to losing their access to arable land, their homestead, communal woodlands, and homesite trees through widowhood and divorce. These findings support points made by feminist political ecologists regarding entitlements. Women's relationships to natural resources are consistently marked by "asymmetrical entitlements" shaped by gender systems that give women secondary rights to resources, and men primary rights (Thomas-Slayter, Wangari and Rocheleau 291).

Related to this is attention to "space," an important contribution of feminist geographers (WGSG; Momsen and Kinnaird), and another important theme emerging in feminist political ecology. Using space as a lens through which to view social relations can help see patterns of human relations as they are superimposed on and shaped by the natural

environment. Field research tools in feminist political ecology (Fortmann) suggest social mapping of natural resource use and management, a technique that often reveals profoundly gendered patterns in the social geography of space. In my research I found gendered patterns of mobility, gendered divisions of labour related to different natural resources, and gendered knowledge of different spaces and natural resources. As was found by Leach in West Africa, I found no simple equations between place and gender. That is, it is not simply a case of mapping which areas belong to women, and which areas belong to men. When the grids of institutional and gender relations are superimposed onto a spatial map, the spatial geography reveals both gender differences (e.g., divisions of labour and knowledge), and gendered power. For example, while women wield significant aspects of their power and perform many of their key activities in the domestic realm of the homestead, their control is partial, marbled with aspects of male power, particularly the ultimate power to be ejected from the homestead through divorce. The same is true for other spaces in the landscape where women are the primary actors in the use of natural resources, and may even exercise control over the benefits they gain through their use of that space (for example wetlands where women have their gardens). Hence, while a spatial map of the environment is marked by patterns of women's use and benefits, these patterns do not represent a firm demarcation of something like "male space" and "female space." Invoking a social analysis of space can hence add important detail and nuance to the formation and practices of gender and environmental management.

Feminist political ecology also reads gender as a "meaning system" that is produced not only through economic relations and cultural and social institutions, but also as under negotiation as a result of *ecologically* based struggle (Rocheleau et al.). It is an environmental approach that sees the environment as more than just a source of natural resources for human use such as arable land, but as part of the total social system shaping human life. As such, the approach pushes on the boundaries of materialist political economy approaches, which tend to follow western social science in confining analysis to "the social" (assumed as separate from the "natural" world). Indeed, it can be read as a return to Marx's dialectical view of "Man and Nature," as a useful beginning point to challenge human/nature dualist thinking. According to Marx, "Man" is seen as part of Nature, while at the same time driven to transform it, and in the process is also transformed by it (Salleh 71). Salleh reminds feminists to challenge the "conceptual gulf" in linking nature and "the social" (183). Feminist political ecology takes up this call by interrogating the specificity of the cultural/social system of human/environment relations in different contexts, in order to reveal further layers of gender relations and how these relate to broader social organization, processes, meaning systems, and the contours of environmental crisis.

Conclusions

The theoretical arguments and accompanying evidence from Southern Africa presented here vindicates the feminist political ecology approach that emphasizes the situatedness of human/environment relations, and the importance of global processes, social institutions, and gender relations in understanding these dynamics. This approach offers much more than earlier approaches to women, environment and development in Africa, which focused on the economic or livelihood aspects of environmental degradation and women's roles as users, managers, and potential saviours of the environment. Feminist political ecology also escapes the limitations of ecofeminist approaches that assume a special relationship between women and their environments. As I finish up Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake,* which speaks only too eloquently of the environmental catastrophe looming ahead of us as we hurl down our current path, I wish us not to be described some day as people who "say ... all kinds of junk they claimed to know something about." We just don't have time for that.

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Dr. Allison F. Goebel is a Sociologist and Assistant Professor in Women's Studies and Environmental Studies at Queen's University, whose research focuses on gender and land, agriculture and woodlands in Southern Africa. Mailing address: Mackintosh-Corry Hall, Room D504, Queen's University, Kingston, ON, Canada K7L 3N6.

[1]Critiques of feminist development literature can be applied here (see Mohanty).

[2]See also Sturgeon 1997 on the role of eco-feminist politics as a unifying force in the WEDO process.

[3]Some of the key early texts include: Biehl; Daly; Diamond and Orenstein; Gaard; Griffin; Merchant 1990; Plant. Key contributions to later debates include: Alaimo; Carlassare 1999; Merchant 1994; and Mellor among many others.

[4]As written about in Shiva (1988), the Indian Chipko (tree-hugging) Movement started in 1973 in a district in Uttar Pradesh as a local protest against commercial forestry. In an African context, Kenya's Green Belt Movement in which rural women planted trees in large numbers (see Hyma and Nyamwange) is often referred to in similar terms (Sturgeon).

[5]The word "traditional" is highly problematic, as it tends to imply a static system based in the past, which is in opposition to the "modern," "colonial," "western" or "foreign." I use the word "traditional" with the understanding that the "traditions" that people describe are not timeless and unchanging, but represent current understanding and deployment of the concept of "tradition" by the people using the term.

[6]See Sachs; Bruijn et al.; Rocheleau et al.; *National Women's Studies Association Journal (NWSA)* "Special Edition: Women, Ecology and the Environment" 9 (3) (1997).

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OLIVE ROBERTS

My Journey

I've had a life –
conquered pyramids
drawn warmth from the sun.
Felt the spray of distant oceans,
to prairie sky sung devotions.
Flown free into the impenetrable blue
and ... as others do
screamed frustration into the wind,
faced death, shared life.
In some ways ... made a difference.

Olive is 82 years old. She lives in Port Perry, Ontario.