



Aus: International Viewpoint Online magazine

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6062>

## Feminism and ecology: the same struggle?

Wednesday 8 May 2019, by Marijke Colle

*The ecofeminist movement was born a few decades ago from the observation that there is an analogy between the exploitation of women and the exploitation of nature. In the current context of urgency and collapse and as the concept of the convergence of struggles resurfaces, interest in this feminist movement is resurfacing. For Marijke Colle, an ecofeminist from the first, who is better situated than women to become aware of the interconnection between nature and human life, and the urgency of action to stop the destruction of the planet?*

### In what context has ecofeminism emerged?

Ecofeminist awareness emerged in the Third World, where environmental problems (droughts, floods, cyclones, deforestation and so on) affect people, especially women, earlier and more intensely. In India, for example, in the early 1970s, a group of women formed a movement - the Chipko movement - to save their forest from exploitation for industrial and commercial purposes. These forests had been monopolized by British colonial rule and after independence remained state property with strong military influence. For the villages that adjoined these forests on the slopes of the Himalayas, inhabited mainly by women - men migrated to work in the city - forests were very important, especially in the fight against erosion. It was therefore in the name of the preservation of their environment that these Indian peasants began to encircle the trees to prevent their being cut down, physically interposing themselves between them and the army that came to cut them. This action was a success in part because the military did not dare to attack women.

A leading Indian philosopher, Vandana Shiva, who joined the movement, has played an important role in shaping the eco-feminist vision. She denounces, among other things, demographic policies that designate women as responsible for overpopulation, considered as the cause of the environmental crisis. She opposes the birth control policies that led, with the help of the Indian army, to the abortion of thousands of fetuses of girls (less valued in India than boys, especially because of the dowry to be paid by the families of girls at weddings).

In Latin American countries, ecofeminism is mainly related to the concept of Buen Vivir contributed by indigenous peoples. This way of thinking in which women play an important role is based on a harmonious relationship between nature and human beings. It favours the quality of life rather than the acquisition of a quantity of objects.

## **Alongside this ecofeminism of the South, there is also a more Western ecofeminism ...**

The emergence of ecofeminism in the United States and Europe dates back to the early 1980s, in a very different context. It is primarily related to the nuclear arms race inherent in the Cold War. In the United States, the Women's Pentagon Action brought together two thousand women following the accident at the Three Miles Island nuclear power station in March 1979. These women denounced the militarism of society. In Britain, women organized a peace camp to protest the nuclear missile storage project at the Greenham Common base. This pacifist movement was driven by women who rejected war, who wanted to preserve the lives of their children and more broadly the future of humanity and the planet. American ecofeminism, influenced by liberation theology, also includes a spiritual current of theologians who rebel against the fact that in our culture, God is male, that nature is not taken into account, that women are relegated to the background ... Some identify with witches hunted over the centuries, others tell their history and their struggles in poetic stories.

## **How did women come to articulate feminist and ecological issues?**

The central thesis of ecofeminism consists in saying that there is an analogy, similar characteristics between the exploitation of woman and that of nature: the lack of respect for them, the place assigned to them, the rendering invisible of their work, their production and so on. Vandava Shiva for example drew a parallel between the monitoring of pregnant women by technoscience that allows the selection of fetuses and the way scientists try to dominate and shape nature, eliminating wild plants for the expansion of monocultures. Ecofeminists show that these oppressions are connected, that they reinforce each other in patriarchal culture. But it is through very concrete struggles that they have come to articulate feminist and ecological issues, to intersect the battles against the dominations suffered by women and nature and thus allow their emancipation. Ecofeminism developed through the collective, inventive, creative, nonviolent experience of women and not theoretically.

## **Where do these related oppressions come from?**

Modern thought is structured around dualisms whose origins sometimes go back to very ancient times (Plato, Saint Augustine and so on), the woman being seen as a uterus whereas the man is perceived as a brain. Later in the Renaissance, the separation of Man and Nature helped to divide and hierarchize human and non-human relationships that see on the one hand nature, woman, emotions, psychology, intuition and on the other, culture, man, reason, power, the rational apprehension of things. These dualisms constitute a justification for devaluing both women and nature as well as the empowerment of men over them. With the advent of capitalist society and the development of technoscience, the exploitation of women and the instrumentalization of nature have found even more perverse forms, even reducing them to mere commodities.

## **By "greening" feminism, is not there a risk of "naturalizing" it?**

The identification of women with nature brought about by dualistic thinking is problematic simply because it is not true. It diminishes the human potential in general of women (but also men) who are confined to so-called feminine (or masculine) skills and roles. Now, a woman can flourish in so-called men's skills and vice versa. They are not in essence closer to nature than men. For several decades, the feminist movement has sought to free women from this link to nature exploited by patriarchal thought to assign women to the domestic sphere and exclude them from politics. Some fearful bourgeois radical feminists have rejected ecofeminism by accusing it of keeping women in their traditional role. In my opinion, this accusation is not true. It is a movement of very real struggles through which women have become aware of their oppression and their refusal to live in a world governed by the laws of war, profit, competition, domination over nature. It is the dynamic of action that has allowed the rise of awareness of the systems of domination and exploitation exercised over women and nature. This

awareness could not be achieved by reading books but by being part of real movements. Ecofeminists, rather than denying their relation to nature and cutting themselves off from the world to which humanity belongs, seek to revalue this link and to build new non-hierarchical relations, out of domination. It is the hierarchy and dominance in these relationships - the fact that what is "male" is better than what is "female"; that nature is depreciated despite its usefulness to the functioning of society - which is problematic and not the relationship as such.

### **What are the similarities between the situation in which ecofeminism emerged and those of the present day?**

The fear of the future and the urgency of proposing another vision of the world, peaceful and respectful of the Earth, were the driving force behind the women's resistance actions in the 80s. Today, the ecological issue has become central among us with the consciousness of climate change. At the same time, women perceive very clearly that feminist struggles are not exhausted, that violence against women - brought to the fore by the Me too movement - is still very real for many of them. The violence of the male-female relationship is very deep in our capitalist and patriarchal society, just like the violence inflicted on nature.

### **What are the contributions of women to ecological struggle?**

Because women are responsible for so much in the community, because of the roles assigned to them (domestic work, responsibility for the well-being of children, the elderly, the sick and so on), they are led to feel more concerned about ecological and environmental issues. They will be the first ones challenged by pollution problems in their environment, their habitat, their factory and looking for solutions to protect the life of their children, families, colleagues; to become aware of the inextricable link between human society and its social environment, the interconnection between nature and human life, the urgency to act, to stop the destruction of the planet ... and to set in motion for it to change. It is not for nothing that young schoolgirls have been so prominent in the climate strikes ... Ecology teaches us that nothing is lost; that all non-organic waste remains on the planet and that the dustbin is filling up. This realization that we have only one planet is also very noticeable among women who still today take most responsibility for the household.

### **What are the perspectives that ecofeminists open up in the current context?**

Ecofeminists show that the functioning of society depends largely on the invisible and gratuitous contributions of women and nature. All the work of caring for others, domestic tasks, worrying about relationships in the family, in the community because they belong to private life and are out of the commercial circuit, are invisible, like the ecosystem services for nature. And yet, this female work represents about 2/3 of the economy. Ecofeminists seek to make this invisible visible and to value it. If we want an ecological solution to the crisis that we experience, we must take back and expand to the world this deep attitude of women that is care and prudence: not taking uncalculated risks, privileging cooperation over competition, quality over quantity, use value (the utility of objects that we make for our well-being) over market value (the objects that are produced to be sold and make profit), recycling rather than throwing away ... Making the invisible visible, that's why the March 8 women's strike is so important. It allows women to realize that if they stop, the world stops. It is important to trust in your own actions because that is how women will show their contributions, their power to act collectively and this ecofeminism can become concrete.

*Marijke Colle is a member and activist of Gauche anticapitaliste, Belgian section of the Fourth International long active on questions of ecology and of feminism*