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Persistent women and environment linkages in climate change and sustainable development agendas



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SYNOPSIS

Since the 1980s, the discourse that women are intrinsically closer to nature, are hardest hit by environmental degradation, and have special knowledge of natural resource systems has influenced development policy circles and intervention programmes globally. Despite criticism being levelled time and again at the discourse's potential risk of passing on the burden of environmental care onto women while letting men off the hook, the argument still holds strong sway in current climate change debates. Women are once again being singled out as climate victims and 'powerful agents of change, as they are seen to lead early warning systems and identify water supplies that have saved climate change-affected communities' (GenderCC, 2008: 1).

The paper explores why and how women–environment linkages remain seductive and influential, and forwards three arguments for this: first, for gender to muster entry into climate politics, women's identities are projected as fixed, centred, and uniform – and tied to nature; second, the discourse of climate change vulnerability has proven to be a strategic entry point for feminist advocacy; and finally, inertia associated with past environmental projects has reinstated the women–environment discourse in contemporary climate change discussions and possibly, future interventions.

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Introduction

Global forums held since the Earth Summit in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro have underscored the need for more sustainable ways of harnessing the earth's resources and an increasing awareness that we all share a common future. Deforestation, water scarcity, land degradation and now sea level rise, fiercer cyclones, longer droughts, flooding, hot and cold waves, and overall warming due to climate change have become ubiquitous talking points in any policy reform process in both developing and developed regions. Recent international negotiations on curbing the rate of greenhouse gas emissions by countries have at times drawn acrimonious lines of debate between representatives of countries of the north and south.

The women's movement had drawn global attention as early as two decades earlier, with apex moments during two world conferences on women: in Mexico in 1975, followed

by Nairobi in 1985. It was during the Earth Summit in 1992 when these two movements coalesced, and an adjunct – though not totally mainstream – feminist presence became intrinsic to the environment and development agenda, and where a nascent environmental agenda likewise became part of the international women's movement, although this coalition remains shoddy.

The first stirrings of women's defence of nature and the environment on a global stage were heard at the Nairobi conference in 1985, citing indigenous women's protection of trees from the threat of massive logging in India as part of the celebrated Chipko movement, among other similar testimonies from other continents (Shiva, 1989). Years later, this same assertion of women's key role in protecting the planet and its natural resources resonated as the core message in the World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet in 1991, a precursor to the Earth Summit on Environment and Development (UNCED) the following year in Rio de Janeiro. The

'story line' that women from the global South were the hardest hit by the increasing degradation of natural resources gained enormous currency, and thus they were seen to be a major constituency in the sustainable use of resources as principal caretakers of the environment.

Following Rio, however, this central maxim that linked women with the environment – a so-called variant of ecofeminism from the South – came under question by feminist scholars (for a synopsis, see [Elmhirst & Resurrección, 2008](#)). They sought more multi-dimensional explanations for women and men's dispositions, decision-making and variable use and management of environmental resources and challenged women-as-victim-then-as-agent stereotypes. They also warned of the risks of positioning women in environmental projects and programmes that sidestep existing disproportionate workloads and gendered hierarchies. In short, the slogans that drew attention to women as the environment's victims and caretakers did not match more complex and daily realities of resource use, power and negotiation.

Fast forward to the 21st century. Decades down the line from the Women's World Conference in Nairobi in 1985 and the UNCED Earth Summit in 1992, the banner of women as victims of climate change and central agents for adaptation, mitigation and the recovery of climate-affected places and communities flies high once more:

The brunt of climate change will be borne by poor women and their communities who are most dependent on the land and natural resources for their food, livelihood, fuel and medicine yet less equipped to cope to natural disasters and weather variations. Women are particularly affected because of socially ascribed roles resulting from entrenched feudal–patriarchal discrimination on them. Rural women also take a heavy toll being the ones engaging in various remedies to make ends meet.

[WEDO, 2008: 5]

A few recent writings once more caution against the repeated stereotypes in climate politics and their implications on related policy and programmes ([Arora-Jonsson, 2010](#); [Jolly, 2004](#); [MacGregor, 2010](#); [Okali, 2011](#)). However there remains an absence of explanations for the persistence of these discourses. This paper therefore aims to provide explanations for the persistence of women–environment linkages in emerging global discourses on environment, sustainable development and climate change, despite the intellectual critiques and lessons learned in the debates of the 1990s. It is argued that women–environment linkages are resilient because they are tied to the exigencies of political claim-making for a more visible gender platform, are partially framed by environmental and climate change institutional discourses that welcome notions of vulnerability, feminine agency and care for the environment, and also build on the inertia of past women–environment projects and programmes that emanated from the 1990s' Agenda 21 agreements on environment and development.

In this paper, I will demonstrate the persistent use of women–environment linkages by presenting relevant official statements and documented accounts within two 'moments' of the environment, climate and development nexus: the UNCED Earth Summit in Rio Janeiro, 1992, and more recent activities around climate change events that involve the

United Nations Framework for the Climate Change Convention (UNFCCC) and civil society organisations from secondary accounts. The two sections that follow are organised around each of these two historical global environmental platforms, viz, UNCED and events around UNFCCC. Each section will discuss brief histories of these events and draw from parts of official platform agreements and statements that address linkages between women and environment. Discussions in each section will also cover the conceptual premises, shortcomings and correctives in the gender discourses that dominated these events. A third section at the end will briefly discuss the ramifications of women, environment and development (WED) and ecofeminist discourses on environmental and climate policy. Throughout these sections, I will offer reasons why women–environment linkages are persistent and pervasive.

Ecofeminism and WED in the Earth Summit 1992

Ecofeminism and WED as women–environment platforms in environment and development

Debates on essentialism in the 1970s¹ set the stage for feminist entry into the environment and development arena in the late 1980s, which became the new terrain for essentialist re-assertions of the feminine, thus assigning gender differences as innate and transcultural properties. Some feminists embraced the idea that women are closer to nature and, in the context of the growing environmental movement, argued that women inherently have a better understanding of the importance of environmental protection ([Mies & Shiva, 1993](#)). Ecofeminist thinking was premised on the idea that the domination of women was linked to environmental destruction, chiming with earlier cultural feminists' celebration of women's greater humanism, pacificism, nurturance and spiritual strengths ([Nightingale, 2006: 166](#)).

Exploration of the links between gender and the environment in Asia was stimulated largely by compelling narratives of rural and indigenous women saving trees and thwarting commercial loggers, destroyers of forests and forest livelihoods.² Two popular strands – a particular variant of ecofeminism from a Southern perspective and WED – posited natural connections between women and environmental resources, positioning rural women of the South as the unrecognised caretakers of the environment, and in whose care the earth and its resources had better chances of surviving for future generations ([Dankelman & Davidson, 1988](#); [Rodda, 1991](#); [Shiva, 1989](#); [Sontheimer, 1991](#)). All pre-colonial societies "were based on an ontology of the feminine as the living principle", [Vandana Shiva \(1989: 42\)](#) argued that "rural, indigenous women are the original givers of life and are therefore the rightful caretakers of nature".

The feminine ontology of WED, unlike Shiva's more spiritualist–cultural ontological approach, drew from more materialist premises: women were more materially adversely affected by environmental degradation due to an a priori, and largely universal, gender division of labour ([Agarwal, 1992](#)). In this division, women are usually assigned reproductive roles, explaining why they were chiefly responsible for the collection of forest products and food for daily household subsistence. Planners interpreted this to mean that women should then be

targeted in conservation projects since their daily roles connected them more closely to natural resources. Interestingly, the roots of WED thinking were associated with environmental disciplines such as forestry and agriculture in developing regions. Women were found to spend more time in collecting water, food, fodder and fuel that were increasingly threatened by rapid rates of deforestation and intensive mono-variety agriculture (Braidotti, Charkiewicz, Hausler, & Wieringa, 1995). Early examples in this research for policy genre have been worked on women, forests and energy resources (DGIS, 1990; FAO, 1989), especially in the light of the global energy crisis in the 1970s in the course of searches for rural energy alternatives. These discourses fell under an emerging analytical stream of environment and development that became influential throughout the last two decades.³

Mies and Shiva (1993) portrayed imperialism and colonialism as bearers of western science and rationality, simultaneously characterising this as patriarchal or 'masculinist', thus doing violence to both women and nature. Saving nature became effectively linked with women in the pursuit of sustainable development, as both having been traditionally marginal issues in the development agenda and sharing a common stake for recovery and empowerment (Dankelman & Davidson, 1988). This type of thinking not only critiques 'development', but effectively challenges the representational strategy adopted initially by those concerned with overcoming differences among women by articulating a centred Third World woman subject in order to press for women's rights to inclusion in international agreements around sustainable development (Mohanty, 1988; Saunders, 2002).

In the terrain of environment and development discussions and policymaking, ecofeminism and WED collectively evolved as a discourse that manifested strong materialist-essentialist linkages between women and the environment (Agarwal, 2001). Common to both is a sense in which experiences of the environment are differentiated by gender through the materially distinct daily work activities and responsibilities of men and women. Consequently, men and women hold gender-differentiated interests in natural resource management through their distinctive roles, responsibilities and knowledge. Gender is thus understood as a critical variable in shaping processes of ecological change, viable livelihoods and the prospects for sustainable development. The strong political tendency was to link environmental interests with those of women. The Rio conventions in 1992 and the Beijing Women's Platform for Action in 1995 were showcase moments for this discursive strand of ecofeminism and WED, as official discourses have been heavily influenced by them, as shown in Table 1 (underlined portions emphasise elements of this discourse).

Many of the statements in Table 1 recognise women's innate role as natural resource managers with special knowledge and skills in caring for the environment. Over the years, scholars have been critical of these assumptions and the use of 'women's roles' in some fixed way. Some of their thoughts are briefly discussed below.

First, research has challenged the notion that women have fixed caretaker roles and that they may just end up being key assets to be 'harnessed' in resource conservation initiatives (Leach, 1992, 1994; Rocheleau, 1991). Planning on the basis of fixed and reified 'roles' may, in the end, turn out

to be counterproductive for women. Policy translations of WED are implicitly founded on the rational choice stream in policy studies that rely on simplifications around women's care of natural resources as atomised individuals with fixed attributes and with roles that are disassociated from wider relationships and webs of power. Second, Rao (1991) has argued for the need to contextualise women as they dynamically respond to complex environmental realities and to consider how they enter into and engage in social relationships with men within the institutions of their natural resource-dependent societies instead of a priori perceptions on women's roles. Third, both ecofeminism and WED also connote a victim status of rural women from the South, conveying images of women walking longer distances in the daily collection of food, fuel and fodder for their households as resources are increasingly depleted. Fourth, special emphasis is placed on women's knowledge of the environment without investigating whether this emanates from a position of subordinate obligation and power configurations. And fifth, the women-environment linkage is generally oblivious of men and their changing roles within resource use and management.

Disquiet with the translation of WED thinking into policy has run in parallel with critiques levelled at Women in Development (WID) perspectives; the latter saw women as a stand-alone homogeneous group with a set of static and pre-defined roles that translated into their disadvantaged social lives (Rathgeber, 1990). Arguments have been made for more context-specific and historically-nuanced understandings of the relationship of specific groups of women with specific environmental resources, especially as these are mediated by their complex and power-negotiated relations with men, kin and other social actors. An early proponent of a critical gender analysis in unpacking environmental relations, Jackson (1993a, 1993b) proposed that analysis should focus on power relations between women and men, and that women be treated as a disaggregated group of subjects as gender roles are socially and historically constructed and continually reformulated. Like others before her, Jackson challenged the idea of 'women' as a natural constituency for environmental projects, underscoring the contingent nature and fluidity of gender interests, an approach which has been discussed more fully in debates regarding practical and strategic interests elsewhere in the wider field of gender and development (Molyneux, 1985; Moser, 1993; Wieringa, 1994).

Political simplifications to muster entry into the environmental agenda

At the heart of all the earlier criticisms of women-environment discourses was the intellectual unease with the idea of a centred feminine subject as the stable icon of feminist environmental advocacy. It is a notion that ties in well with the view that "politics is about the attempt to create a centre" (Dirks, Eley, & Ortner, 1994: 32), offering the first reason why women-environment linkages are persistent and seductive. WED and ecofeminist discourses seem to put forward the view that women's identity is one-dimensional and fixed: homogenising and hegemonising gender identity and difference to muster a programmatic statement or to legitimise claim making within the environmental arena. This is reminiscent of Alcoff's (2000) reference to Gayatri Spivak's use of

Table 1The Rio conventions and the Women's Platform of Action^a.

The Rio de Janeiro Declaration on Environment and Development (1992), UN Commission on Environment & Development (UNCED); Agenda 21 UN Convention on Biological Diversity (1993)	<p>Principle 20: <i>Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable development.</i></p> <p>Preamble: (Paragraph 13) <i>Recognising also the vital role that women play in the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and affirming the need for the full participation of women at all levels of policy-making and implementation for biological diversity conservation.</i></p> <p>The Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) mentions women's practices, knowledge, and gender roles in food production, as do various decisions of the Conference of the Parties (COP), including:</p> <p>SBSTTA recommendation II/7, on agricultural biological diversity and the role of women in managing practices and knowledge;</p> <p>COP decision III/11, para. 17, on promotion of women's knowledge and practices in the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity in the agricultural sector;</p> <p>COP decision V/16 – element 1 of the programme of work of Article 8(j) on promotion of gender-specific ways in which to document and preserve women's knowledge of biological diversity;</p> <p>Decision V/16: Article 8(j) and related provisions states: "<i>Recognizing the vital role that women play in the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, and emphasizing that greater attention should be given to strengthening this role and the participation of women of indigenous and local communities in the programme of work</i>".</p>
UN Convention to Combat Desertification (1994)	<p>Prologue: <i>Stressing the important role played by women in regions affected by desertification and/or drought, particularly in rural areas of developing countries, and the importance of ensuring the full participation of both men and women at all levels in programmes to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought...</i></p> <p>II. General Provisions</p> <p>Article 5: Obligations of affected country Parties <i>Promote awareness and facilitate the participation of local populations, particularly women and youth, with the support of nongovernmental organizations, in efforts to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought...</i></p>
UN Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of Parties Meetings (1995 to present)	<p>No mention of women or gender except in including gender experts in the teams for the formulation of the national action plans on adaptation (NAPAs). In COP7, there were calls for more nominations of women to UNFCCC and Kyoto Protocol bodies.</p>
World Summit on Women Platform for Action, Beijing 1995a,b	<p>Global Framework:</p> <p>34. <i>The continuing environmental degradation that affects all human lives has often a more direct impact on women. Women's health and their livelihood are threatened by pollution and toxic wastes, large-scale deforestation, desertification, drought and depletion of the soil and of coastal and marine resources, with a rising incidence of environmentally related health problems and even death reported among women and girls. Those most affected are rural and indigenous women, whose livelihood and daily subsistence depends directly on sustainable ecosystems.</i></p> <p>K. Women and the Environment</p> <p>250. <i>Women have often played leadership roles or taken the lead in promoting an environmental ethic, reducing resource use, and reusing and recycling resources to minimise waste and excessive consumption. Women can have a particularly powerful role in influencing sustainable consumption decisions. In addition, women's contributions to environmental management, including through grassroots and youth campaigns to protect the environment, have often taken place at the local level, where decentralised action on environmental issues is most needed and decisive. Women, especially indigenous women, have particular knowledge of ecological linkages and fragile ecosystem management. Women in many communities provide the main labour force for subsistence production, including production of seafood; hence, their role is crucial to the provision of food and nutrition, the enhancement of the subsistence and informal sectors and the preservation of the environment.</i></p>
Report of the High-Level Intergovernmental Meeting to Review Regional Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and Asia-Pacific (2004)	<p>K. Women and the environment</p> <p>44. The Meeting took note of the <i>critical linkage between the environmental changes and the role of women as natural resource managers and providers. A number of countries reported that the opportunities for women's access to and participation in the management of natural resources and promotion of sustainable development had been broadened in the past few years. Examples included community-based forest management programmes and community-based water management.</i></p>

All direct quotes from documents are in italics.

^a The Rio conventions are legally binding whereas the Beijing Platform for Action is not legally binding.

'strategic essentialism' that pragmatically accepts the necessity of using identity categories to advance political claims in the public domain, despite the illusion of homogeneity. Butler (1994) refers to this as materialising a particular understanding of gender as 'fact', and inscribing an ontological phenomenon onto a social regime such as the environment or climate

change negotiations. This requires repetitively harnessing a centred identity of 'woman' as rural producer vulnerable to environmental change and crises into a strong and simplified conception of a licenced group in order to claim political space. By doing so, however, all other kinds of women and other gendered and social subjectivities that could not be disciplined

into a highly centred feminine subject are excluded from the frame.⁴

Feminists, in short, have had to embrace simplification of identities and interests in order to insert gender agendas into institutions that otherwise have different priorities (Cornwall, Harrison, & Whitehead, 2007).⁵ It is far less cumbersome for institutions to relate with women in terms of impacted victims, as being hardest hit by environmental crises and as agents of positive environmental action than to frame policy that addresses the complex drivers of gendered vulnerabilities and relations of power within which they are embedded.⁶ Mosse and Lewis (2006: 5) also refer to a related variant within general development programming as the propensity for “mobilizing simplifications of policy and politics”. Political simplifications, however, are incapable of addressing the complex problems that policy is required to redress on the ground.

The next section takes these thoughts forward onto contemporary climate debates and begins by briefly discussing the entry of feminism into this arena.

Persistent women–environment linkages resonate in climate change discussions

Feminist entry into the climate debates

The new discourses on climate justice and vulnerability (re)map the notion of social differences onto the political landscapes of climate change negotiations, agreements and possible policy regimes in the same reified manner as in the UNCED process. Despite criticism levelled at the theoretical premises and policy applications of WED and ecofeminism in the 1990s, the women–environment linkage has been reinscribed onto the contemporary climate change agenda. Leach (2007), however, is of the view that this discourse has declined in recent years since a more useful perspective premised on fluid and relational gender relations seems to have been adopted in specific arenas such as in forestry, water management, and urban environments. Despite this development, it seems to be far from true in climate discussions (I will discuss this below; see Table 2).

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was one of three instruments formed and adopted at the 1992 UN Summit for Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro.⁷ In March 1994, with 188 signatories and 166 ratifying nations, the UNFCCC came into legal force. The agreement adopted at UNCED in 1992 established the Conference of the Parties (COP) and the UNFCCC Secretariat. Since 1992, the UNFCCC has begun an international process of climate change negotiations and committed parties to a universal objective to reduce emissions with a benchmark of 1990 emission levels. An international women's meeting⁸ ran parallel during the COP1 meeting in Berlin in 1995, which benefited largely from the momentum at the UNCED Earth Summit. Those who attended this parallel meeting were mostly active in the anti-nuclear movement, thus the agenda was largely influenced by the demand for a shift in government investments and subsidies away from nuclear and fossil fuels toward safe, renewable energy systems. This effort, however, was not sustained (Röhr, 2006).

During the UNFCCC's early days of negotiations around GHG emissions, the creation of a feminist ‘political centre’

was unsuccessful since actors coalesced largely around anti-nuclear positions and renewable energy alternatives (Skutsch, 2002). Instead, a conjuncture of discursive streams from the disaster risk and management camp matched by recent thinking on climate justice, vulnerability, adaptation and resilience and this served to reinstate the women–environment linkage many years later.

Subsequent UNFCCC agreements and treaties did not articulate any concern for gender issues, except for the need to include gender experts in the National Adaptation Programs for Action (NAPAs) among Least Developed Countries (LCDs) as indicated in Table 1. In COP7 in Marrakech, Decision FCCC/CP/2001/13/add.4 (2001), proposed by Samoa and supported by Russia and the EU governments, called for more nominations of women to the UNFCCC and Kyoto Protocol⁹ bodies; it also tasked the Secretariat with determining the gender composition of these bodies and with bringing their results to the attention of the Parties. In a large part, however, efforts to bring in a gender/feminist agenda mostly fell by the wayside. The first stirrings of a palpable gender coalition were felt only during COP11 in Montreal (WEDO, ENERGIA, LIFE, IUCN and FAO¹⁰). Awareness raising, marshalling evidence through a collection of case studies on the adverse effects of climate change impacts on women, and capacity building were some of the activities conducted during COP11.

Leach (2007) provides us with clues regarding the initial absence of a women–environment linkage in the climate change discussions. Problems identified by the climate change actors are much more global and trans-boundary thus requiring international and multi-levelled approaches, unlike in the immediate post-UNCED period when more community-based and localised responses were proposed. Skutsch (2002: 31) confirms this view particularly since there has been a need to coalesce around universal issues “and not divert attention to gender aspects” given limited resources and the crisis moment of the US' uncooperative behaviour during the signing of the Kyoto Protocol. Additionally, the Inter-government Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the scientific bedrock of the UNFCCC founded in 1988 under the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), does not discuss the gender dimensions of climate change and centrally devotes its discussions to the technical aspects of climate changes such as mitigation measures and scales of impact through modelling approaches. The central mandate of the UNFCCC was to negotiate the curbing of GHG emissions among involved parties, and which relied largely on technico-physical and biophysical evidence to negotiate consensus and agreements. Resurrección, Sajor, and Fajber (2008: 19) make the case in a recent scoping study on climate change adaptation: “Adaptation is understood as primarily a technical means with which to reduce and minimise the impact of climate change rather than as a complex set of responses to existing climatic and non-climatic factors that contribute to people's vulnerability”. However, while Chapter 17 on “Adaptation” in the IPCC's 4th Assessment Report discusses some aspects on gender and its differentiated aspects, it does not employ a WED framework that posits women as victims of climate change and their propensity to be the chief carers of climate-affected resources and people.

It was only in COP13, held in Bali, Indonesia, after a series of kick-start activities that a global network of organisations

Table 2Action platforms, submissions to global bodies, expert panel statements and declarations on gender and climate change^a.

Commission on the Status of Women (CSW): Interactive Expert Panel on 'Gender Perspectives on Climate Change' (2008) from the Moderator's Summary	<p>2. ... <i>Given that climate change disproportionately affects the poor, and that women form the majority of the world's poor, women are among the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change.</i></p> <p><i>Participants noted further that women are particularly vulnerable to natural disasters such as floods, fires, and mudslide.</i></p> <p>3. <i>Participants stressed that climate change has a direct impact on women's lives because of their domestic responsibilities. In Africa, for example, women have primary responsibility for food security, household water supply, and the provision of energy for cooking and heating. Conditions such as drought, deforestation and erratic rainfall have a disproportionate negative effect on their ability to carry out these duties.</i></p> <p>9. <i>In forest resource management, for example, women play key roles in planting, protecting or caring for seedlings and small trees, as well as in planting and maintaining homestead woodlots and plantations on public lands, whereas men are more likely to be involved in extracting timber. Women typically gather non-timber forest products for commercial purposes and to improve the living conditions within their households (e.g., medicines, fodder for livestock).</i></p>
GenderCC: Women for Climate Justice – Submission to UNFCCC SBSTA (Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice) ^b (2009) as part of the run-up to COP 15 in Copenhagen 2009	<p><i>The UN climate change process should support the protection and restoration of forests and supportive ecosystems, respecting and strengthening all rights of indigenous and forest dwelling communities who have so far conserved them with special support to women's traditional rights and knowledge systems.</i></p>
Negotiating Text of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Long-Term Cooperative Action under the UNFCCC (2009)	<p>22. <i>The implementation of the adaptation [framework] [programme] {shall}{should}:</i></p> <p>(j) <i>Address the concerns and/or build the resilience of, inter alia:</i></p> <p>(ii) <i>Particularly vulnerable populations, groups and communities, especially women, children, the elderly and indigenous peoples, including through promoting a gender perspective and a community-based approach to adaptation;</i></p> <p>31. <i>In providing support, priority {shall}{should} be given to:</i></p> <p>(c) <i>Particularly vulnerable populations, groups and communities, especially the poor, women, children, the elderly, indigenous peoples, minorities and those suffering from disability.</i></p>
UN WomenWatch: www.un.org/womenwatch The UN Internet Gateway on Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women 2011	<p><i>In many of these contexts, women are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change than men – primarily as they constitute the majority of the world's poor and are more dependent for their livelihood on natural resources that are threatened by climate change.</i></p> <p><i>It is important to remember, however, that women are not only vulnerable to climate change but they are also effective actors or agents of change in relation to both mitigation and adaptation. Women often have a strong body of knowledge and expertise that can be used in climate change mitigation, disaster reduction and adaptation strategies. Furthermore, women's responsibilities in households and communities, as stewards of natural and household resources, positions them well to contribute to livelihood strategies adapted to changing environmental realities.</i></p>

^a These are a chosen few. Not included are the volumes of publications on gender and climate change from development organisations. All direct quotes from documents are in italics.

^b SBSTA is one of two subsidiary bodies of the UNFCCC. The other being the SBI, or the Subsidiary Body for Implementation.

emerged under the GenderCC (Women for Climate Justice and the Global Gender and Climate Alliance (GGCA) whose founding members UNDP, UNEP, IUCN, WEDO presently have over 25 (global) member organisations). Since 2009, an official Women and Gender Constituency was also formed under UNFCCC, following the stakeholder approach of UNCED/CSD (Commission on Sustainable Development). These groups were formally constituted to put forward a definitive gender/feminist agenda to UNFCCC negotiations and meetings.¹¹ Prior to COP13 in Bali, Indonesian officials both from the government and the local hosting committee of the UNFCCC sent positive signals indicating their support for women's involvement in the meeting. There were plenty of side events addressing gender and social dimensions of adaptation, vulnerability, mitigation, financing energy and emerging climate regimes (Röhr & Hemmati, 2008). A Women's Caucus was held in cooperation with a Climate Justice Caucus, which was a new event in the COP meeting. Indeed, coalescing around the principle of climate justice opened a new pathway for civil society engagement with UNFCCC processes. The discourse of climate justice in a future climate regime has evolved from

earlier concerns over the critical gaps in energy consumption patterns between North and South, payments for adaptation programmes in view of earlier investments into mitigation efforts, risky trade-offs between new efforts at carbon sequestration and maintaining local livelihoods of communities.

Persistent women–environment linkages in climate debates: vulnerability and adaptive agency as the new flashpoints

Viable entry points for gender analyses and responsiveness have been argued to lie in the domains of efficiency in mitigation efforts in most areas in the North, and attention differentiated vulnerabilities among people of the Global South (Röhr, 2006; Skutsch, 2002). A network of women leaders for the environment, in an unprecedented manner, pushed forward a fundamental recommendation during the Bali meeting:

Recognise that women are powerful agents of change and that their full participation is critical in adaptation and mitigation policies and initiatives, and hence, guarantee

that women and gender experts participate in all decisions related to climate change.

[GenderCC, 2008: 1]

Once more, the icon of women being climate victims has drawn significant attention from the climate tables: “The notion that women are most vulnerable victims of climate change and its impacts is what makes many negotiators receptive to women and gender aspects” (Röhr, 2006: 59, cited in Arora-Jonsson, 2010: 747). To demonstrate this point further, Table 2 below outlines excerpts from international climate change documents intended to influence the COP conferences at various times (underlined portions underscore the resonance of women–environment linkages).

Adaptation and vulnerability have been flashpoints for a renewed WED discourse.¹² The statements in Table 2 indicate that women constitute a particularly vulnerable group, thus calling for the need for redress and response. Again, their roles in natural resource use, this time threatened by the deleterious effects of climate change-induced droughts and fiercer cyclones, are underscored. Their special knowledge, rights and skills on forest resources once more highlight their special affinity with the environment, assigning them a key agency and stakeholder role in adapting and mitigating climate change. Thus, a second reason for the persistence of women–environment discourses is the entry of ‘vulnerability’ into the lexicon of climate change adaptation. The idea that women constitute a vulnerable category has gained considerable purchase in global and national climate change discussions. MacGregor (2010) refers to this as the discursive categorisation of women in contemporary climate politics, and which has its share of shortcomings and correctives to be discussed in the following sub-section.

Re-conceptualising vulnerability and gender

Arora-Jonsson (2010: 746) questions equating women’s climate change vulnerability with poverty, by interrogating the veracity of the ‘feminization of poverty’ thesis in the first place: “No scientific study is ever cited to document percentages such as the assertion that 70% of all poor people are women”. She argues that the idea of women being the world’s poorest has largely been iconised rather than explored. Thus, there is more to vulnerability than just a specific set of characteristics such as being ‘poor’. MacGregor (2010) observes a fixation on ‘impacts’ in the gender and climate change literature that are material and measurable, and that gender is rarely mentioned in official and NGO climate change discourses except as women being climate victims. She argues for more critical feminist analyses of the types of discourses that shape climate change politics and institutions. She notes the positivist framing of most climate change discourses that measure impact and counts victims. It follows then that if planners were convinced that women registered significant victim numbers, then the case would have been made for inserting gender into climate change negotiations and future funded programming.¹³

Nightingale (2009) suggests that climate adaptation, being a concept drawn from the ecological sciences, is fundamentally an individualised concept referring to the ability of human societies and ecological systems to cope with climate variation, or referred to ‘adaptive capacity’ of human and ecological

systems, in which people’s adaptive capacities are determined by their socioeconomic characteristics. For instance, the IPCC states that the determinants of adaptive capacity are directly correlated with measures of economic development (gross domestic product, or GDP, per capita) (IPCC, 2007). Developing countries are also recognised to be more vulnerable to climate change because of their ‘lack of institutional capacity’ among other things (this is usually interpreted as a lack of capacity of government) (IPCC, 2007). The gender and disaster literature, for instance, has identified several vulnerability characteristics of women to sensitise disaster risk managers so as to mitigate these characteristics (Bradshaw, 2004; Enarson, 1998). Similarly preoccupied with people’s characteristics, Wisner (2007: 4,11) view vulnerability in terms of “the characteristics of a person or group and their situation influencing their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural hazard”. This definition considers people’s characteristics as central to the shaping of their vulnerability. MacGregor (2010) refers to this as the positivist framing of the climate change debates that assume that impacts can be measured, and victims, counted. Thus activists take pains to marshal the ‘evidence’ usually in the form of case studies to demonstrate the gender-specific nature of climate change impacts.

In contrast, others view vulnerability as a more complex process rather than a set of sometimes assumed fixed characteristics. For instance, in the hazards literature, Blaikie, Cannon, Davis, and Wisner (1994) state that vulnerability is a key concept in predicting and understanding the differentiated impacts of various disasters on groups in a society, as it takes into account people and the differences among them, affirming that people’s circumstances change and can be changed by a disaster. Additionally, Enarson (1998) warns us that vulnerability is not an intrinsic characteristic, or does not derive from a single factor such as ‘being a woman’, but is indicative of historically and culturally specific patterns of practices, processes and power relations that render some groups or persons more disadvantaged than others. Vulnerability is therefore a dynamic condition shaped by existing and emerging inequities in resource distribution and access, the control individuals are able to exert over choices and opportunities, and historical patterns of social domination and marginalisation (Eakin & Luers, 2006), and not solely a set of intrinsic properties that individuals or groups possess. By framing vulnerability, therefore, as a ‘differentiating process’ (Hilhorst & Bankoff, 2004), we come to understand how people come to be gendered, disciplined and regulated as women or men – and as a result, differentially vulnerable – under varying conditions of climate stresses.

In addition to understanding vulnerability as process-oriented, Nightingale (2009) shifts and complicates the conceptualisation of gender further: from a set of fixed binary roles assigned to women and men, to viewing resource management and indeed, climate adaptation, as processes where gender and social inequalities are contested, changed and reinforced. It is through these processes that the social meanings of the various social categories of difference – man, woman, ethnic group member, etc. – are played out and that power is actually produced and performed (Nightingale, 2009: 86). People – or women – are not essentially vulnerable nor can they be attributed distinct or fixed properties of vulnerability.

Social biases, discriminatory institutional and discursive practices materialise their vulnerability, as they respond to climate stresses, and consequently, categorise them as a vulnerable group.¹⁴ These practices are the elements worth mitigating, rather than creating focused programmes and advocacies foisting responsibilities on women (only), tapping an imagined special and distinct agency, and thus passing on to them the additional burden of adapting to climate change in the tradition of earlier WED projects, which have created their own inertia.

From politics to policy: lost in translation

Since UNCED in 1992, no other articulation of gender has gained the widest traction with a wide range of institutions and actors than the WED discourse. Leach (2007) observes that the women–environment appeal in the 1990s supported a view of women as allies and prime movers in resource conservation projects, which was readily adopted by agencies since they were pressured to address environmental concerns and gender-differentiated environmental impacts. She also points to the evidence of the World Bank that developed a synergistic or ‘win–win’ approach to environment and gender, arguing for treating women as the best agents for ensuring resource conservation in the 1990s. More recently, the World Bank (2011) has re-echoed this point, asserting that the empowerment of women is key to climate resilience. Also in past decades, WED/ecofeminist assumptions were also brought into community-level ‘primary environmental care’ approach advocated by several NGOs (see Davidson and Myers, 1992 in Leach, 2007). Women were seen to be the central agents of primary environmental care, which linked caring for the environment as well as responding to community and household basic needs. Thus, the third compelling reason for the persistence of women–environment linkages today, quite simply, is the inertia of its adoption of past programmes. The binding and non binding agreements and declarations in Tables 1 and 2 bear testimony to the pervasiveness and influence of the WED discourse that in turn informed concrete projects and programmes at different scales, community, national and regional, but which later revealed problematic outcomes.

Throughout the 1990s, evidence from project outcomes began to demonstrate the shortcomings of combined WED and ecofeminist approaches once translated into policy and action. Due to their close link with the natural environment, women virtually became a constituency for programmes to mobilise for conservation and environmental tasks, oblivious as to whether they actually wanted to involve themselves, or whether they were available in view of their huge responsibilities, or whether they would directly benefit from their involvements in the end (Resurrección, 1999, 2006). As a result, project ‘success’ has been achieved by appropriating women’s (usually unpaid) labour in environmental activities that may not have benefited them, but more greatly favoured successful environmental and conservationist goals. Involving women in projects also added the ‘environment’ to their already long list of caring chores. Jackson (1998) refers to this as instrumentalising symptomatic of the efficiency paradigm in neo-liberal oriented development projects. Essentialising a feminine agency in environmental programmes may indeed register drawbacks; thus caution must be taken not to increase

inequalities in gender relations, workloads, stoke discriminatory attitudes and/or unevenly distribute risks and costs. Failed programmes demonstrate that links between women and environment do *not* match the everyday lives of people.

In light of failed efforts to translate politics into sound policy, the writings of Charlotte Perkins Gilman come to mind, instructing us that essentialisms may be compelling for certain political moments but they are usually not practical to the real experience of real people they are meant to represent (Lemert, 2000). Mosse and Lewis (2006) further urge us to conduct more rigorous sociologies of life on the ground in our policy and planning: such as if we see that women appeared to be specially involved in natural resource use and management, then this needs to be explained and ascertained; or engage in critical exercises of self-reflexivity over institutional and policy practices, the social life of programmes and projects and the diversity of interests behind policy models. This avoids the trap of framing policies that are one-size fits all and homogenises solutions for all types of contexts where there is need to enable adaptive capacities, efficiency in mitigation, as well as unpack easy trade-offs in programmes such as REDD.¹⁵ For instance, the Green Climate Fund (GCF),¹⁶ envisaged to leverage US\$ 100 billion yearly until 2020 from public and private sources worldwide, is intended to address climate adaptation and mitigation efforts and projects especially in developing countries. It may be useful that lessons from the past – where women were inadvertently mobilised for resource conservation projects without clear returns to their welfare and empowerment – sufficiently inform advocates working for the GCF’s gender responsive platforms, which appear to be gradually gaining positive momentum.

Conclusions

Two historical ‘moments’ define the global environmental agenda at the edge of the new millennium and henceforth have transformed it: the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and the subsequent and ongoing meetings and deliberations around the UNFCCC Conference of Parties (COP). This paper has inquired into the nature and extent of the feminist agenda within these environmental watershed events and processes. From this paper’s exposition of key and summarised aspects of discursive practices prior to, during and after these events, I am led to conclude that a strong women–environment linkage has sustained the feminist agenda, despite the increased adoption of alternative and complex perspectives on gender relations and power in natural resource management sectors like forestry and water management towards the end of the 1990s (Leach, 2007). Climate change debates have reinstated the women–environment discourse, thereby demonstrating its resilience.

This paper does not claim to disparage the women–environment linkages in environment and climate change political discourses, or to dismiss the merits of a politics based on social difference. What the paper suggests is that learning from the past, we see that problematic outcomes usually emerge when the simplifications that fuel politics segue into policy and programming. Thus in the hope of raising awareness on the traps that these simplifications may create, I have instead opted to explain the resilience of women–environment linkages despite their intellectual and

practical shortcomings, by investigating, “On what basis, at different times and in different places, does a non-fixed identity become temporarily fixed in such a way that particular groups and individuals behave as a particular kind of agency?” (Dirks et al., 1994: 32). Three reasons emerge.

First, the pragmatic need for simplification in conducting climate and environmental politics, where a centred feminine subject who is both climate-vulnerable and agency-endowed, captures the imagination of institutions that are otherwise mired in technological minutiae and political deadlocking in the delicate task of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. To create a visible gender platform, feminists had to locate politically viable entry points that were more or less acceptable to scientists, policy makers and fellow social movement colleagues, as well as to their agenda for transformation. The discourse that links women with the environment stood up to this requirement. Through the essentialised qualities of women's close ties with environmental resources, feminists were able to make claims to a specific space in this political arena. Further, feminists coalesced around an ontological, fixed, simplified and centred feminine subject, simultaneously vulnerable but with change agent qualities. This claim to an essential feminine subject tied to nature homogenises other women subjects, blurring the possibility of more context-specific subjectivities rooted in class, ethnicity, age, eco-zones,¹⁷ and so on and denying the range of climate-related experiences possible, where positive opportunities may also inadvertently lie. Second, the discourse of climate change vulnerability has proven to be a strategic entry point for feminist advocacy. Inevitably, this will have to capitalise on sharp gender differences on the adverse impacts of climate change. WED and ecofeminist discourses have plenty to show insofar as women being a prime constituency of the hardest hit environmental victims and environmental protection stakeholders. The history of feminist engagement with global institutions shows us that this is fraught with difficulties since feminist advocacies and discourses are often blunted to suit and shoehorn into these institutions' hegemonic designs and discourses. Under such circumstances, the storyline of women being most vulnerable to climate change effects more easily dovetails with the pervasive positivist framing of most climate change discourses that measures impacts, counts victims, and looks for opportunities for mitigating actions. And finally, the inertia associated with WED projects since the 1990s has re-instated the WED women-environment discourse in contemporary climate change discussions and possibly, future localised interventions in climate mitigation and adaptation.

That said, this brings me to policymaking, or the crafting of concrete responses to a claimed deficit: that is, how do we ensure that climate change does not increase the vulnerability of women and people more generally? This brings us to briefly consider the policy implications of adopting more useful approaches to gender, environment and climate change.

From Cornwall (2007), we learn that it may be more useful to implement policy that is not premised on gross essentialisms or a priori differences and fixed oppositions between women and men in their dispositions towards environmental and climate change action, but to instead focus on the actual cultural, discursive or political practices that create such inequalities, vulnerabilities and constitute differences in the first place.¹⁸ In short, it may be more useful

to address the drivers of gendered vulnerability as well as other types of vulnerability, rather than aim for focused targets of women's participation in projects, per se. This will shift the lens towards the practices that materialise the marginalisation, difference, and vulnerabilities of types of women, of certain categories of men and of particular ethnic groups, instead of designing programmes that are ‘one size fits all’. These practices are the elements worth mitigating, rather than creating programmes foisting responsibilities on women (only), tapping an imagined special and distinct agency, and thus passing on to them the additional burden of climate-related action which, may ultimately, let ‘men off the hook’.

In short, while it may be politically strategic to muster the entry of gender into climate negotiations through a centred and climate-vulnerable feminine subject, climate programmes will be better served by more agile understandings of women, men and their actual multi-dimensional experiences and adaptations to a changed climate. A climate change policy regime will therefore benefit less from political imaginaries of women and environment ties, but from flexible readings of life on the ground, or in short, a stronger and more complex social analysis of climate, environment, power and people that informs response and action.

Endnotes

¹ In the early 1970s, feminists emphasised women's similarity to men in order to demand for equality; toward the end of the decade, feminist scholars like Chodorow (1978) and Rich (1976) emphasised women's intrinsic difference from men, as well as women's similarity to each other based on shared identities and experiences especially motherhood. By the late 1980s, the idea of a shared women's experience – sexuality, subjectivity and psyche – referred to as ‘essentialism’, came under heavy criticism, positing an underlying western ethnocentric bias (Clough, 2000). Essentialism, as it is specifically used in this paper, refers to a persistent, centred, one-dimensional feminine subject who is usually assigned particular material feminine traits, involved in a constructed gender division of labour defined in universalist terms, and is usually defined in binary opposition to men (Cleaver, 2000; Cornwall, 2007).

² These narratives are derived from Shiva's (1989) use of the Chipko Movement in India to demonstrate the vanguard role of rural women in environmental protection. Both factual and conceptual assumptions have been put into question by a special collection of journal papers in the *Journal of Peasant Studies* (Vol. 25, No. 4, 1998). The same iconisation was applied to northern upland women in the Philippines who supposedly disrobed before a group of engineers to protest the construction of a dam in 1974.

³ Awareness of the link between the environment and development was stimulated by Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring* in, 1962 Carson, 1962, scientifically demonstrating the harmful effects of agricultural pesticides, shattering the myth that the environment had an infinite capacity for pollutant absorption. In 1968, the Club of Rome commissioned a study to model and analyse the dynamic interactions between industrial production, population, environmental degradation, food consumption and natural resource use that ended in the publication, *The Limits to Growth*. This highlighted the limits to technological progress, the finite capacity of the planet in terms of food production, the upcoming depletion of natural resources, and the threat of overpopulation. That same year, Paul Ehrlich's neo-Malthusian *The Population Bomb* provided the link between population, resource exploitation, and the environment. In 1987, the Brundtland Report *Our Common Future* laid the foundations for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and its parallel NGO Forum. The Brundtland Report highlighted three fundamental components to sustainable development: environmental protection, economic growth and social equity. It also advocated for redistributing resources towards poorer nations while encouraging their economic growth, and suggested that equity, growth and environmental maintenance are simultaneously possible, not mutually exclusive and win-win. With this

entry point, social movements and environmental activists present at the NGO Forum argued that 'Enlightenment thinking' and the scientific revolution in the 16th and 17th centuries held a mechanistic view of nature that privileged competition and domination as necessary to the pursuit of progress, and which persisted even in the present time. They saw environmental degradation as typifying 'Enlightenment thinking', which extolled the ability of humans to use nature for their own ends. It is also argued that such western post-Enlightenment images have been imposed on indigenous societies in Asia and Africa through scientific and development processes (Boyle & McEachern, 1998; Leach, 2007).

⁴ This discussion chimes with the ideas of Nightingale (2006) and her work on the mutual constitution of gender and environment that builds on Judith Butler's ideas on performativity and materialising gender.

⁵ Feminist engagements with development and environment institutions have been problematic. Sen (2006), for instance, points out that powerful institutions may adopt gender agendas but ultimately control how discourses about gender are to be deployed and used. Cornwall (2007: 7) similarly point out the domestication of feminist ideas and languages to fit the exigencies of agency procedures and priorities. As a case in point, Bistuer and Cabo (2004), compared the discursive space of gender in the official UNCED Agenda 21 and Women's Action Agenda 21, which was drafted a year earlier in The World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet in Miami attended by 1500 women who drew up demands for UNCED in the following year, 1992. Following the drafting of Rio's Agenda 21, many were disappointed that the original vision of a social, economic and ecological revolution articulated earlier in Miami was downplayed in favour of a notion of sustainable development as "a readjustment of the hegemonic economic growth model using the environmental correctness criteria" (Bistuer & Cabo, 2004: 218; see also Boyle & McEachern, 1998). Equally noteworthy, Bistuer and Cabo (2004) noted that Rio's Agenda 21 views women and minorities as lowly situated and needing educational and family planning programmes, contrasting sharply with the earlier Women's Agenda 21 that underscored women's agency in bringing about sustainable development. Of these gender insertions in Rio's Agenda 21, they grimly remark: "the existence of 'the other' has been recognized, but this 'other' is not a subject in its own right" (Bistuer & Cabo, 2004: 214).

⁶ Hajer (1997)Page: 15 traces this concern for adverse impacts and damage to the growing dominance of ecological modernisation, where the increasingly central role of science was to come up with a proof of the damaging effects of environmental degradation. MacGregor (2010) builds on Hajer's discussion on as she puts forward the view that much of the impact-focused approach in gender and climate change discourses stream from an increased role of positivist science in the framing of climate change.

⁷ The other instrument was the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). See Table 1.

⁸ The meeting was called 'Solidarity in the Greenhouse'.

⁹ The Kyoto Protocol is an international agreement linked to UNFCCC. The major feature of the Kyoto Protocol is that it sets binding targets for 37 industrialised countries and the European community for reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. These amount to an average of 5% against 1990 levels over the five-year period 2008–2012. The major distinction between the Protocol and the Convention is that while the Convention encouraged industrialised countries to stabilise GHG emissions, the Protocol commits them to do so (http://unfccc.int/kyoto_protocol/items/2830.php).

¹⁰ The acronyms refer to Women's Environment & Development Organization, ENERGIA, LIFE, International Union for the Conservation of Nature and the Food and Agriculture Organization, respectively.

¹¹ Villagrasa (2002) however notes that women were centrally active in the negotiations for the signing of the Kyoto Protocol, but it was unclear whether there was a clear feminist agenda during the negotiations or side events thereof. Delegates celebrated adoption of the Protocol in 1997.

¹² Much more a WED discourse than an ecofeminist one since the culturalist predilections of the discourse are now basically gone, paving the way for a more grounded engagement on climate change issues of adaptation and mitigation.

¹³ There have been efforts to depart from the 'victim' tag in emerging activist discourses (cf for example: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201112061041.html>; <http://nyc.gov.ph/blogs/nyc-blogs/443-not-victims-but-agents-the-role-of-women-in-the-fight-against-climate-change>), replaced with an agency-centred view of women. This may be equally problematic especially if translated into policy and programming, which may result in 'women cleaning up the mess, and letting men off the hook' programmes that pushed the earth caretaking burdens onto women's doorstep reminiscent of the mid 1990s. This also assumes a rational and socially-disembodied view of women in their complex social relations and locations.

¹⁴ Early in the climate debate, O'Riordan and Jordan (1999) posited that climate change is a context through which institutions employ 'social devices' such as creating and interpreting scientific knowledge and selecting politically tolerable adaptation strategies.

¹⁵ REDD or Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation.

¹⁶ There is sufficient evidence emerging from the UNFCCC COP 17 deliberations in Durban, South Africa in December 2011, in that the creation of the GCF and its governance infrastructure will be completed.

¹⁷ The author recognises that activist literature on gender and climate change has indicated intersections between gender and other social categories such as class, ethnicity, race and age. However, the overarching impression communicated remains to be that of a centred feminist subject.

¹⁸ Okali (2011) refreshingly offers a set of 'operating principles' to guide programming and planning in gender and climate change (agriculture) that cautions against gender simplifications and conventional framings of the poor and gender.

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