



## **Environmental Education and Gender Justice**

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## **Preface and greetings: Kia orana kotou katoatoa**

First let me say thank you to ICAE for inviting me to be on this panel at its 7<sup>th</sup> assembly. For me this is an opportunity to learn from others on the panel and to bring my thoughts into these important and timely debates.

My modest contribution comes full of qualifications and appreciation to many fine activists and scholars whose actions and work I have followed - often from a distance - from my part of the world – the Pacific/Oceania.

I would like to start by introducing three women from the Pacific whose lives illustrate the main points I am making today.

The first, Lena, is a young mother from Tari in the Highlands Province of PNG. She makes her living from subsistence agriculture and rearing pigs. PNG is biggest country in the Pacific (est. pop 2006 6.2 million) and very diverse physically, culturally and socially. Tari is characterised by being isolated from the national and regional government systems with very high levels of HIV/Aids, domestic and tribal violence, land disputes, alcohol and marijuana abuse, polygamy, women selling sex and poverty. To date, Lena, a second wife, survives in this environment by the frequent sale of pigs and produce.

Second, is my friend Mii from Mauke, a small island in the Cook Islands – where I was born - (est. pop 2006 13,500). Mii makes her living making head garlands for visitors and periodically collecting the scented leaves in the inland areas of the uplifted coral island. With less than 400 people on the island, her son migrates to NZ every year to pick fruit and earn money. Last year he returned with a washing machine for his Mother.

Third is my mother-in-law who lives in Wanigela village in the lowlands of PNG. She is a subsistence gardener, with 8 children, 14 grandchildren, and already way past average life expectancy for women in PNG which is only in the mid 50's. Unlike Tari province where Lena lives this area is considered a low density, low poverty area. In addition to her gardening activities and responsibilities, she is also a potter whose large round pots are often sought after for prestigious gifting throughout the region.

The last picture is of my namesake, the 4<sup>th</sup> and last daughter who at 7 is just starting school. She does not go regularly to school preferring to stay with her grandparents.

I introduce these women as a way to introduce to this forum a little about the region I come from, because – and this is my first of three points – place does matter.

## ***Place matters***

Place matters because without a recognition of and attachment to places, we cannot defend the environment, we cannot feel a struggle, we cannot fight for anything. [This is not unlike saying that without a recognition and attachment to women as a group, we cannot defend women's rights.]

However, we need to recognise the different ways and the different places that we are attached to. They are not all 'natural'. They are what we make them and in this way, we can make them whatever we want. We can protect and conserve places, enhance and modify places, abuse and overlook places.

But as the margins of ecological survival are shrinking and, in many places, nature is already 'answering back', the lives and livelihoods of many people, especially women in the global south, are under constant threat of not only total ruin (through sea levels rising), but also total transformation (through deforestation and monoculture plantations).

While many environmental problems may not appear to differentiate between men and women, there is no doubt that the social and political responses to these problems are profoundly gendered. For instance, while a tsunami strikes everyone rarely do relief packages include sanitary napkins for women.

Must acknowledge the range of places that negotiations over environmental issues occur through all spatial scales from the body, to the household to the community, nation and globally (Harcourt and Escobar 2005). Must also recognise the temporal nature of attachments to places; our current residence mostly in hotels in Nairobi (are we changing our towels everyday), our regular places of abode (do we recycle or compost), other attachments to places emotionally, socially, spiritually, culturally (how much do we consume what others produce there).

The ecological features of these places cannot however be disassociated from political issues over inequitable access to the variety of resources in these places. To some extent ecological science and environmentalism (as a social movement) have been able to identify special areas of ecological or environmental importance.

But the routine daily use of the places we make our lives in – the water, fuel, shelter and food that we need – are often just part of a global common whose use is increasingly negotiated by those whose daily livelihoods do not depend on its sustainability.

For example, a small scale logging operation in Wanigela effected the cleanliness of the river water systems and the women, including my mother-in-law, protested. They were fully supported by the village and the logging company changed its practice. However when women also protested about

their rights to land compensation issues, it was a different issue. Initially women were not recognised by the logging company as beneficiaries which suited some of the local men. It was Ok for women to protest contamination of water by the loggers – but when they entered into public debates into their rights to land compensation, this was not as easily accepted. Instead many men resorted to a mantra that Wanigela was a patriarchal system which meant of inheritance went only through the male line. But even in the recent past, there were always exceptions to this rule because culture is mutable – it can be changed and is being changed and mostly Christian but traditionally knowledgeable women in Wanigela, knew this and struggled at great cost for their rightful acknowledgment and recompence (Underhill-Sem 2005).

So as we know people are part of every place – and this brings me to my second main point – gender matters – but in increasingly complex and multiple ways.

In environment debates, the idea is that population growth causes environmental degradation is still often heard – but there is a greater understanding now of the relationship between population change, environmental degradation and woman's sexual and reproductive rights. For instance, in Tari where Lena lives, land and soil erosion is a growing problem as is its very high population density. Yet demographically, Tari is also notable for its very low fertility rates. This is longstanding and with many complex cultural and historical features to it, but the contemporary analysis relates this low fertility to the high incidence of polygamy and infertility to sexually transmitted diseases. So it is the behaviour of men having many wives rather than women having too many children that also contributes to population growth. Not to mention the increase in coffee and tea plantations.

### ***Gender matters***

At the same time that we recognise the complexity of the places we call our homes, we must recognise that feminist issues must be understood in the full complexity of the diverse relations of power that exist both between men and women and, among women. Feminism, ecofeminism, feminist environmentalism, feminist political ecology – these are all perspectives on women and the environment that reveal significant ideological divergences.

Women have long been connected with the environment and one of the key features of environmental struggles is that women often led these struggles. This is especially notable in indigenous or ethnic minority communities because these struggles are in defence of losing more complex attachments to places (Escobar 2006).

Although widely recognised, the rationale for associating women with the environment has been rightfully contested based on different ideological arguments.

Ecofeminists suggest that the domination of 'women' is intimately linked to the domination of 'nature' because both are characterized as having an essential capacity to provide and nurture life and therefore both are subject to the patriarchal need to dominate (Shiva 1988, Diamond and Orestein 1990).

The essentialist notions that underlie these enduring claims of ecofeminism have been challenged by feminists who instead urge a focus on the historical and material relations between women and nature (Argawal, 1992, Warren 1987). The historical-materialist position claims that the appropriation and distribution of natural resources is differentiated and gender is one of the key axes of differentiation, alongside for instance class, race and caste. The high incidence of women as heads of poor households is evident of the gendered differentiation of access to resources. The implications for sustainable livelihoods is clear.

Although these positions are often counterpoised against each other, increasingly more sophisticated refinements are being made (Cudworth 2005) as a way to advance understandings of the relations between women and the environment.

A third significant feminist position is that of feminist political ecology which builds on an ecofeminist argument but "highlights the gender knowledges, rights and politics in the context of environmental arguments" (Nightingale 2006: 166). Significantly, feminist political ecology animates its arguments at a variety of scales and not just at the household and community level.

Within these three feminist strands of thought and action, the specific notion of women's human rights to a safe and clean environment rather than their generic human rights, rarely emerges. Yet without an explicit notion of women's human rights within these debates, connections with other rights-based women's movements are difficult to make. But at the same time without a livelihood, a woman's right to life, work, justice and so on is critically curtailed.

Alongside these feminist approaches to the environmental issues, traditional approaches to the big environmental problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are also problematic for women seeking secure sustainable livelihoods. While environment movements have proliferated, many generally overlook the social in their concern over non-human 'natural' processes.

Mainstream environment movements have moved from being protectionist conservation movements to movements incorporating sustainable development and then, around 2002, towards managerial movements in partnership with non social movement organisations like private companies and benevolent trusts. Although women feature prominently in many mainstream environment movements, feminist environmental movements are remarkably absent, although there are notable exceptions, Greenbelt movement in Africa.

Feminist concerns in mainstream environmental movements are rarely given prominence which reinforces enduring notions that essentialise women as silent victims of dominant capitalist practices. The eco feminist fallacy that renders women indistinguishable from nature is most often problematically invoked in relation to indigenous social movements.

A feminist political ecology perspective provides a framework to understand how access to and enjoyment of the material basis of our lives comes about through conjunctures of local, regional and global ecological provisioning and local, regional and global political appropriation and redistribution of resources. It works with the notion of survival which connects the global north and south and which is understood in the context of capitalist globalization.

Feminist political ecology draws attention to the ways in which local ecological and livelihoods systems are linked to national and global government, economic and political systems which act in various subtle and not so subtle ways to constrain alternative development possibilities at the local level. Gendered knowledges and spaces and women's collective struggles are also key themes in feminist political ecology (Rouchleau et al 1996).

The gendering of the complex interaction of the environment and livelihoods is evident in the "market triumphalism" identified by Peet and Watt (1996). They argue that market triumphalism erodes moral economies and replaces them with a morally indifferent (not to say bankrupt) stance which elevates profit taking above all other objectives, including ecological sustainability' (Shroeder and Suryanata 1996:190). The dispossession and private accumulation that follows in this process disproportionately affects poor women more than poor men in the global south.

### ***Implications for environmental education***

As a key motif in my understanding of progressive adult education, transformative learning is critical. This is because it allows for inclusive learning practices. In the context of progressive feminist environmental education, I take this to refer to being inclusive of different ideological perspectives.

There are many and varied ways in which to deal with different and often divergent or antagonistic perspectives in ways that transform learning into critical thinking. I feel this responsibility heavily as I move between the learning/teaching environments of my formal teaching at the University of Auckland in New Zealand to the less formal occasions I have when I'm in Mauke, Tari or Wanigela for instance. Whether I am helping to weed gardens, look after children impatient to eat, wash laundry, tell stories or engage in formal interviewing, the women I am with are keen to engage with new ideas. Indeed they even relish the opportunity to educate me on their perspectives infused – as my ideas are – from an array of other ways of knowing: Christian, traditional, contemporary and experiential. Perhaps this is better known as a **feminist political ecology of learning**. This would encompass critical ways

of understanding and explaining the world by paying attention to multiple ways of knowing, as played across a variety of physical scales but which ultimately need to deliver their rights as women to livelihoods of their choice.

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