

“Gender Justice and the Environment: A Brief Overview of Latin America”

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Gender Justice and the Planetary Crisis

Latin America is recognized as the region that contains up to 50% of the world’s biodiversity, with some of the world’s most megadiverse countries in it. The region holds a quarter of the world’s tropical forests and other species-rich ecosystems, such as the Amazon and Petén Basins, the Andes, El Chaco, Pantanal, Mata Atlantica, to name a few. The sheer vastness of this resource rich areas is precisely what enables the region to have such a productive structure. This in turn though has stark effects on women’s lives which, paired with the region’s patriarchal discriminatory and violent cultural patterns, maintain structural barriers that are difficult for women to overcome.

To the naked eye, it may be difficult to understand the close connection of the current environmental crisis and gender when in reality, this connection is a main part of the root causes of the crisis itself. It turns out that women are not only the worst impacted from biodiversity loss, pollution, climate change, and food insecurity, but also the least responsible in creating these.

The current state of environmental discourse tends to view environmental issues as problems for science, and not as issues of social justice (2), and so-called solutions have largely neglected this fact. But looking through these issues with a gender lens (that is, from a feminist perspective), can help us clarify our understanding of the interconnected “causes of the social and environmental destruction” (3).

Gender justice refers to equality and equity between men, women and people from all genders, and the full recognition of their fundamental rights. Historically, there has been gender discrimination worldwide: from cultural norms and stereotypes that prohibit women’s access to education to a steep gender pay gap (women’s lower wages); from laws that deny women’s right to own property including by inheritance, to those that prevent women from working; from forced marriage to female genital mutilation, and the list goes on... But women’s contributions have been paramount to human development, for instance, as they have traditionally held the burden of taking care of the household including caring for the young, the elderly and the ill, also known as ‘unpaid domestic and care work’. In fact, a United Nations Report in 2016 states that “Unpaid care and domestic work is valued to be 10 and 39 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product”, hence, it is no surprise that women form the majority of the world’s poor. Figures for Latin America and the Caribbean show that women spend 2.8 more times doing unpaid domestic and care work than men.

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² Mallory C. (2013) Environmental Justice, Ecofeminism, and Power. In: Rozzi R., Pickett S., Palmer C., Armesto J., Callicott J. (eds) Linking Ecology and Ethics for a Changing World. Ecology and Ethics, vol 1. Springer, Dordrecht. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-7470-4_21

³ Further reading: Portman, A. Food Sovereignty and Gender Justice. J Agric Environ Ethics 31, 455–466 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10806-018-9739-2>

As gender justice constitutes an issue of social justice which closely intersects with environmental degradation, eco-feminist theory helps us understand how racism, gender discrimination, and environmental degradation are reinforcing systems of oppression based on a patriarchal system that perpetuates inequality and human disconnection from nature. In such a system, there's a conceptual dichotomy of the 'masculine' as the dominant, and the 'feminine' as subordinate, thus 'Mother Nature' can be subjected to exploitation. This western conception that society dominates nature and that men naturally dominates women, marginalizes both women and nature simultaneously. There's increasing evidence of the interlinkages between planetary health and women's health, for instance, it has been recognized that women are more exposed to toxins, and impacts from pollution including hazardous waste and chemicals, that can be disproportionately harmful to women particularly pregnant women, the fetus as well as breastfeeding women and their babies. Therefore, the moral superiority conveyed to that one who dominates also allows for other injustices based on gender, race, and class to happen. It is important to recognize that this is not mere identity politics but rather a struggle rooted in intersectionality.

Prior to colonization, some societies in Latin America had been matriarchal systems. Afterwards, this changed and the western colonial 'male-thropocentrism' was imposed contributing to disappearing women's valuable knowledge and contributions to biodiversity conservation, food sovereignty, and tackling climate change, among many other indigenous and gender knowledge. For a region whose economy very much depends on natural resources and that is increasingly affected by extractivism - land use change for exploitation, land grabs, evictions, displacement, and violence - not having a voice means even more hurdles for women's empowerment and the realization of their basic human rights.

A Gender perspective in Effective Environmental Governance

It has been recognized that women and men have differentiated roles in the use and management of natural resources, that women are more susceptible to the impacts of climate change and, despite the fact that women constitute most of the world's small-scale food producers, women are more likely to suffer from hunger, malnutrition, and related diseases due to the inequitable distribution of power, which is especially true for the Latin American region according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO); besides, female-headed households have greater chances of being poor. However, policies behind biodiversity conservation, climate change and food security, have largely excluded this.

Rural women are often more dependent on biodiversity for their livelihoods while men tend to be more involved in the areas related to the commercialization of derived products, such as wood for timber or charcoal. Many indigenous and peasant women and girls in the developing world depend on nature's bounty for their livelihoods as they are in charge of food preparation, seed-keeping, fetching water, gathering medicinal plants, collecting firewood for heat and cooking, as well as collecting non-timber forest products (such as fruits, nuts, fibers). As women and girls spend more time in direct contact with natural resources, they hold important traditional knowledge and can also be the first ones to recognize when a resource has been depleted and/or when changes in the climate have occurred. When access to these resources is limited or denied, women and their families suffer as they would need to walk longer distances to fetch the resources they need, being exposed to other risks such as illness or even violence including rape.

Hence, ecosystems' health matters in order to ensure the survival of those who directly depend on it, but land tenure rights also matter. Usually, the land that many women and their families have traditionally worked on doesn't belong to them. Certainly, women have fewer capital assets and fewer land tenure rights, which is one of the main factors that has created a differentiated impact between men and women. Unequal access to ownership and control of natural resources rooted in historic patriarchal systems, contribute to the feminization of poverty and perpetuate gender inequalities. This gender asset gap in Latin America has been particularly significant, and has an important correlation to natural resource governance. Agrarian land distribution in the region has been recognized as the most unequal in the world and, according to OXFAM, one estimate suggests that 1% of farms occupy more than half of all productive land, while 80% of agricultural activities are carried out on small family farms pushed to vulnerable areas that constitute only 13% of the land. The few women who actually own land are still at a disadvantage as they can face more difficulties in enforcing their rights and in finding access to markets, credits and technical assistance.

As women and girls face multiple and intersecting inequalities they have less opportunities for accessing education and thus, often barred from participation in decisions that affect them. In many rural contexts in the Global South, cultural norms and outdated views on women do not allow girls to attend school. Consequently, we have noticed that at meetings held with some communities, men constitute the majority of attendants. In fact, while conducting a project with Tzotzil communities in Chiapas, Mexico, women were only present at one of our different meetings at our own request and since they didn't speak Spanish but their native language, they were automatically excluded both from participating at the meeting itself as well as any subsequent decisions taken. Furthermore, women's husbands, fathers or other family members can prohibit them to attend any meetings or gatherings. This lack of participation often results in decisions that neglect women's needs and aspirations which aggravates the existing power imbalance.

In November 2018, a group of peasant women from Chachirí in Santander-Colombia, won the national first prize in the special Colombian honeys contest (4). This is just one of the results achieved when women manage to overcome the multiple barriers imposed. Behind this prize, there is a story of struggles to defeat stigmatization, a process that showed what women are capable of and the importance of supporting their initiatives. At first, many of these women faced obstacles in order to attend regular meetings or were made fun at for attempting to break cultural norms but nowadays, they serve as an example to their communities and more women and youth are willing to take part of their efforts to pursue 'Buen Vivir' (5).

Women represent around 43% of the agriculture labor force in developing countries and they have a key role in all stages of food production such as seed collection, land preparation, weeding, harvesting and storage, food processing and livestock rearing (in some regions, these last two activities constitute an important source of extra income, actually, it is estimated that almost two-

⁴ For further information see <https://globalforestcoalition.org/women-beekeepers-flourish-community-conservation/>

⁵ 'Buen Vivir' is a pluralistic worldview that's prevalent among indigenous communities across Latin America where women are central for its development; Eduardo Gudynas, reknown analyst of environmental conflicts in the region, explains it as "a decolonial stance that [calls for](#) a new ethics that balances quality of life, democratisation of the state and concern with [biocentric](#) ideals".

thirds of the world's 600 million poor livestock keepers are women). Ancestral practices around food sovereignty in many Latin American communities have placed women at the center; in Amazonian Indigenous communities, women are in charge of the 'Chagra', a piece of land where they cultivate the food and medicinal plants they use and that also serves as a place of spiritual and cultural value. Similarly, in Meso-American communities, women are in charge of the 'Milpa', a pillar for family agriculture where, for centuries, they have preserved their traditional knowledge and their culture fostering seed preservation, soil health and environmental wellbeing, a foundation for their survival.

Agricultural policies have been "gender blind" and women's central role as food producers and caretakers disregarded so far and increasingly, the focus of discussions around food production is directed towards commercial and industrial agriculture, where just a handful of corporations control a significant part of the world's food production, and Latin America offers the clearest and most terrible example of this phenomenon. Many women and girls in indigenous and rural communities in South America have faced the impacts of land grabbing as the concentration of land for soy, sugar cane, palm oil, livestock and other commodities' production displaces both communities and opportunities for subsistence farming. In such situations, women have been at the forefront of struggles against corporate control claiming social justice, including climate and gender justice. Women in Paraguay offer a good example of such resistance. In the face of increasing deforestation, land grabbing, and pollution caused by the vast agro-industrial expansion of soy monocultures and beef production for exports, women groups from different organizations defending peasant rights have been working together to protect their livelihoods (6). They have been confronting the police or other violent security forces and have been persecuted and criminalized for defending their territories and claiming their right to food sovereignty. Displacement and evictions put women in greater situations of domestic violence, and other forms of violence against women; pesticide spraying has reached neighboring communities getting them sick increasing women and girls care work burden, and in some instances, pesticide residues from aerial spraying have killed some community members including children. Silvino Talavera was an 11-year old boy from Paraguay when he was accidentally sprayed with pesticides while passing near a soy field. He died a few days later due to poisoning.

There is increased awareness of the vulnerability of women in the face of climate change: indigenous and peasant women must adapt to declining water supplies, climate variability, natural disasters, pest outbreaks, changing precipitation patterns and other impacts of climate change on crop production; during extreme weather events, more women die than men (or die at a younger age) because of a variety of factors, including gender discrimination and cultural factors, such as not knowing how to swim, and lack of access to resources and information for example. According to the World Bank, Latin America is one of the most vulnerable regions to the effects of climate change with an important economic impact that could reach up to \$100,000 million dollars annually by 2050. Women in the region have been leading the struggle to demand climate justice; from the Peruvian Andes where women have been resorting to ancestral knowledge recovering seed varieties that could cope better with changes in the weather, to women from the Landless movement (MST) in Brazil that have been fiercely protesting and opposing corporations responsible for exacerbating greenhouse gas emissions and thus, climate change.

⁶ See photoessay via <https://globalforestcoalition.org/paraguay-cas-photo-essay/>

Current approaches to tackle climate change, biodiversity loss and food insecurity have failed to properly include gender thus normalizing and even intensifying gender inequalities deepening the dependence and marginalization of women. This needs to be changed and we can look to women in Latin America to lead the way and appropriate support to their initiatives can make a huge difference. Integrated community-driven approaches striving for 'Buen Vivir', for instance, have proven to be most effective, rights-based and socially just ways of meeting current environmental challenges while being gender sensitive. Fostering women's active participation in decisions that affect them can challenge imposed external strategies in natural resource governance that deny women's contributions as well as women's differentiated needs, which so far have failed. Stronger efforts are expected from governments, agencies and institutions driving environmental policy-making if we are to succeed in confronting the current planetary crises.