

ECOFEMINISM

1. Definition

American researcher Karen J. Warren¹ defines ecofeminism as "a position based on the following theses:

- 1) there are important connexions between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature
- 2) understanding the status of these connexions is paramount to any attempt at grasping the scope of the oppression of women as well as nature's
- 3) feminist theory and practices must incorporate an ecologist perspective
- 4) the solutions to ecology problems must incorporate a feminist perspective".

Ecofeminism is a contraction of "ecology" and "feminism". This term was first used by feminist writer and activist Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le féminisme ou la mort* ("Feminism or death") in 1974. Ecofeminism is a school of thought based on the relationship "between the exploitation of the environment by human beings and the oppression of women by men"². Julia Mason, a professor in gender studies at the Grand Valley State University in the United States, sees ecofeminism as a tool to analyse the connexion between environmental justice and gender justice³. Therefore, the exploitation of the environment by human beings and the oppression of women can be fought against together.

Ecofeminists advocate for reclaiming (or re-appropriation). It is the idea for women to regain their connexion with nature. Emilie Hache, who wrote a collection of ecofeminist essays entitled "Reclaim", declares that it means "reclaiming without turning back, fixing broken things by reinventing them"⁴.

¹ K. J. Warren, *Ecofeminism: women, culture, nature*, Indiana University Press, 1997, p.3-4.

² Violynea, Natty, « Expliquez-moi l'écoféminisme », Simonae 17th March 2017. Available at: <https://simonae.fr/militantisme/les-indispensables/expliquez-ecofeminisme/>

³ J. Mason, "An Ecofeminist Perspective", TEDxGrandValley, January 2011. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2NQbMVyPzRg>

⁴ A. Lorriaux, « L'écoféminisme, mouvement quasi inconnu au bataillon français », Slate. Available at: <http://www.slate.fr/story/167027/cest-quoi-ecofeminisme-pourquoi-peu-connu-france>

2. History of the movement

Several female authors created this concept, such as Susan Griffin in her book *Woman and Nature* in 1978, in which she analyses the link between woman and nature as essential to the survival of humankind but also identifies them both as victims at the hand of men. In the same movement, Carolyn Merchant explains ecofeminism with a metaphor between the woman and the so-called "organistic" vision of nature in *The Death of Nature*, published in 1980. According to her, Earth can be seen as a nurturing mother who bears life in her breast. She adds that, with this positive image, "one cannot stab one's own mother, one does not pierce her entrails to extract gold, one does not mutilate her body"⁵. Her analysis demonstrates how much assimilating women to nature reminds us of the violence suffered by both women and the environment.

Furthermore, if ecofeminist theories were first thought of and expressed via literature, it is now possible to identify a few ecofeminist protests that have shaped the history of the movement and that naturally inspire today's ecofeminists.

First and foremost, the Chipko movement in India was the first protest with an ecofeminist connotation. Indeed, the women who participated did not identify as ecofeminists even though they fitted the description. Vandana Shiva, one of the leaders of the movement, explains in her article "Ecofeminism"⁶ published in 1982 that the movement consisted mainly of women. In 1973, the inhabitants of the village of Mandal started hugging trees to oppose them being cut down by forest-exploiting companies, they were inspired by an extract of the following poem: "Embrace our trees, prevent them from falling". This movement laid down the bases of a fight that exceeds the one against deforestation, by demonstrating the importance of feminism in ecology. In fact, Vandana Shiva reports that women opposed their own husbands who were working forest clearance⁷. They said in unison "what do the forests give us? They give us water, earth and fresh air. They feed the Earth and all that she gives"⁸.

⁵ C. Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Woman, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, Harper and Collins Publishers (reed.) 1996, p.78.

⁶ V. Shiva, « Ecology Movements in India », *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 1986, p.255-273.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*



Source: World Movement for rain forests, "The learnings of the Chipko movement in India in the fight for feminism and ecology", bulletin 211, March 12th, 2015. Available at: <https://wrm.org.uy/fr/les-articles-du-bulletin-wrm/notre-opinion/les-enseignements-du-mouvement-chipko-de-linde-un-combat-pour-le-feminisme-et-lecologie/>

Subsequently, many ecofeminist protests have been held throughout the world and they were characterised by spirituality and pacifism. The Women's Pentagon Action, which took place in 1980, gathered 2,000 women around the Pentagon in the USA to protest against the race for nuclear weapons. The protest was led by spirituality and strong symbols because women had laid out tombstones on the lawn, and they had sewn threads through the entrances to symbolise the thread of life, and they had also created mourning rituals through songs. Women were singing: "We are the Earth. We say no more war (...) We come alive in solidarity"⁹.

⁹ S. Pirtle, "Women's Pentagon Song". Available at: http://www.wloe.org/fileadmin/Files-EN/PDF/WPA/Nov._15_2016/WOMEN_S_PENTAGON_ACTION_SONG.pdf



Source: Women and Life on Earth, "The Women's Pentagon Action". Available at: <http://www.wloe.org/WLOE-en/background/wpastatem.html>

In the same idea, the Greenham Common movement in England made their voice heard. Women erected a peace camp in 1982 to fight against the installation of nuclear weapons on the Royal Force base in Greenham Common. As Fran De'Ath¹⁰ – who was a part of this protest movement - told it: two strong actions left their mark on the protest. The first one was a human chain of women surrounding the Greenham Common base and the second one was when 200 women dressed as bears entered the base to have a picnic. She remembers being stricken by seeing "over-armed soldiers against teddy bears. That was brilliantly absurd¹¹". She goes on: "Greenham was powerful. In 1982, unarmed women were dancing like witches on a missile silo. It was magical, these powerful images show how much this peace camp played with the traditional feminine image but also on the reversal of that role. Greenham created an alternative world of invincible women. It changed our lives.¹²"

¹⁰ M. Sarnier, H. Khaleeli, L. Harper, J. McCury, "How the Grenham Common protest changed lives: 'We danced on top of nuclear silos'", The Guardian, March 2017. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/mar/20/greenham-common-nuclear-silos-women-protest-peace-camp>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.



Source: Luke O'Reilly, Gareth Richman, "New exhibition celebrates Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, the 1980s predecessor to Extinction Rebellion", Evening Standard. Available at: <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/new-exhibition-celebrates-greenham-common-womens-peace-camp-the-1980s-predecessor-to-extinction-a4265601.html>

3. The different ecofeminist movements

Several schools of thought exist in the movement, although the original idea stays the same. There are two main ones:

- **Spiritual or cultural ecofeminism:** it calls into question monotheist religions by criticising hierarchies and the patriarchy that they perpetuate. Indeed, in the respective sacred books of these religions men are shown as related to God and the rare women present are portrayed as sinners or mothers or servants serving men and their family¹³. Spiritual ecofeminists think that "if the connexion between the Earth and human beings is broken, it because of the dual and hierarchical vision of monotheist religions who place spirituality outside of nature¹⁴".

¹³ M. Benquet and G. Pruvost, "Pratiques écoféministes : corps, savoirs et mobilisations", Travail, genre et sociétés, vol.42, no 2, 2019, pp.23-28.

¹⁴ R. Herlemont, « Ecoféminisme, le croisement des luttes féministes et environnementales », 2nd March 2018. Available at: <https://www.femmes-plurielles.be/ecofeminisme-le-croisement-des-luttes-feministes-et-environnementales/>

- **Social or materialistic ecofeminism:** it criticises the connexion between capitalism and the patriarchy, which are both perceived as complementary entities. The work load that women have to take on inside the household is undervalued, a little or not at all financially compensated, and being made invisible, whereas men can more easily practice valued and financially compensated activities¹⁵.

4. Ecofeminism in France

A pioneer in her fights, Françoise d'Eaubonne used to lead the Ecology and feminism group inside the Mouvement de la Libération des Femmes or MLF (the French Movement for the Liberation of Women) in 1970, before founding her own association in 1978, Ecologie-Féminisme (Ecology-Feminism). However, there is no trace of ecofeminist protests of magnitude in France, contrary to English-speaking countries. Nevertheless, there is a recent growth in the number of French ecofeminists.

Firstly, on 21st September 2019, more than 450 women marched to protest nuclear power in Bure in the Meuse, a throwback to Greenham Common. The organisers even mentioned that "the weekend of 21st and 22nd of September 2019 in a chosen mix without cisgender men (...) a chosen mix that we carry with power and joy thinking about the 40,000 women of the Greenham Common peace camp in England (...)"¹⁶. One can see that this protest gathered women of all sexual orientations, so ecofeminism recognises all identities without discrimination.

In June 2019, the first ecofeminist festival called "Après la Pluie" ("After the Rain") was organised in France by the Les Engraineuses collective¹⁷. On the agenda were several conferences about feminism and ecology, aromatherapy and naturopathy and eco-healing through singing workshops. Therefore, this festival's goal was to bring women closer to nature.

¹⁵ M. Mellor, "Women, nature and the social construction of 'economic man'", *Ecological Economics*, vol.20, Issue 2, February 1997, p.129-140.

¹⁶ BureBureBure, « Weekend antinucléaire et féministe 21-22 septembre 2019 », 7th September 2019. Available at <https://bureburebure.info/weekend-antinucleaire-et-feministe-21-22-septembre-2019/>

¹⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/events/1021891871348946/>



Source: on the left, Christine Poupin, "Ecologie, Féminisme et réduction du temps de travail", Gauche Anticapitaliste, 30th September 2019. Available at: <https://www.gaucheanticapitaliste.org/ecologie-feminisme-et-reduction-du-temps-de-travail/> On the right, picture available at: <https://www.flickrriver.com/photos/8989278@N03/tags/paris/>

One can also see that during the recent Marches for the Climate, numerous ecofeminist slogans were seen such as: "Feminism and climate, same fight", "Neither women nor the Earth are territories to conquer", or "Destroy the patriarchy not the planet".

Though this movement had seem to have lost momentum after the promises of Françoise d'Eaubonne, it seems to be making its way through French society because of the current climate urgency. So, as Vandana Shiva said: "We are either going to have a future when women lead the way to make peace with the Earth or we are not going to have a human future at all¹⁸".

¹⁸ L. Appignanesi, S. Orbach, R. Holmes, *Fifty Shades of Feminism*, London, Hachette Digital, 2013, p.15

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