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Ecofeminism and environmental justice: Examining the intersection of gender, race, and environmental activism

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of gender, race, and environmental activism through the lens of ecofeminism, a framework that addresses the interconnectedness of social, gender, and environmental inequalities. Ecofeminism emphasizes how environmental degradation disproportionately affects marginalized communities, particularly women of color, and explores the ways in which gender and racial dynamics shape individuals' experiences with environmental issues. By exploring case studies of environmental justice movements led by women from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, this research aims to understand the ways in which ecofeminist activism contributes to a more inclusive and just approach to environmental protection.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, women, environment

Introduction

Ecofeminism is a critical theory that explores the links between the oppression of women and the degradation of the environment, acknowledging that both are rooted in patriarchal and exploitative systems. Environmental justice, similarly, emphasizes that environmental degradation disproportionately affects marginalized communities, particularly people of color, low-income populations, and indigenous groups. This paper seeks to examine the intersection of these two frameworks by exploring how gender, race, and class inform environmental activism, and how ecofeminism contributes to the understanding and advocacy for environmental justice.

Research Aim and Objectives

The aim of this research is to explore how ecofeminism can enhance the environmental justice movement by analyzing the ways in which gender, race, and environmental activism intersect. The objectives are to:

- Investigate how ecofeminism provides insights into the lived experiences of marginalized communities in relation to environmental issues.
- Examine the role of women of color in environmental activism.
- Analyze how ecofeminism shapes environmental justice practices and policies.

Theoretical Framework

Ecofeminism

Rooted in both feminism and environmentalism, ecofeminism critiques the exploitation of both women and nature, emphasizing how these forms of domination are often interconnected. Ecofeminists argue that patriarchal systems that degrade the environment also oppress women, particularly those from marginalized communities. Key theorists such as Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, and Carolyn Merchant have highlighted how capitalist exploitation of natural resources intersects with gender and racial inequalities.

Environmental Justice

Environmental justice focuses on the disproportionate impact of environmental harm on marginalized communities, particularly communities of color and low-income individuals.

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It advocates for the right to a healthy environment for all people, regardless of race, class, or economic status. Environmental justice movements call for fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people in environmental decision-making processes, with an emphasis on addressing the historical and systemic inequalities that have led to environmental harm in these communities.

Intersectionality: Gender, Race, and Environmental Activism the Concept of Intersectionality

Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, refers to the ways in which various social identities, such as race, gender, and class, intersect and contribute to unique experiences of oppression. In the context of environmental activism, intersectionality helps to understand how women of color, indigenous women, and other marginalized groups experience environmental degradation differently than other populations. These women often bear the brunt of environmental issues such as pollution, climate change, and resource extraction, yet their voices are frequently marginalized in mainstream environmental movements.

Gender and Racial Inequities in Environmental Issues

Women of color and indigenous communities are disproportionately affected by environmental harms such as pollution, deforestation, and land dispossession. For example, in many parts of the world, indigenous women are the primary caregivers and land stewards, which places them at the forefront of struggles for environmental justice. The experience of environmental degradation is often compounded by gender-based violence, discrimination, and marginalization within environmental advocacy.

Case Studies of Intersectional Environmental Activism

Case Study 1: Indigenous Women and Land Rights in the Global South

Indigenous women, particularly in countries like India, Brazil, and the Philippines, have been at the forefront of environmental activism. These women not only fight for their land rights but also for the protection of their cultural heritage and natural resources. The activism of women like Vandana Shiva in India, who advocates for sustainable farming and biodiversity, is a key example of how ecofeminism addresses both environmental and social justice issues.

Example: The struggle of indigenous women against deforestation in the Amazon Rainforest, where women leaders such as Sonia Guajajara and other indigenous activists have fought for land rights and the preservation of natural ecosystems. These activists face dual oppression: the exploitation of natural resources and gender-based discrimination.

Case Study 2: Environmental Racism in the United States - The Flint Water Crisis

The Flint water crisis in Michigan, which disproportionately impacted Black women and children, serves as a prime example of environmental racism and gendered injustice. Eco feminists have critiqued the lack of action from government institutions, highlighting how racial and gender biases led to the neglect of Flint's predominantly Black community.

Example: Black women in Flint played a central role in raising awareness and organizing grassroots efforts to demand clean water and accountability from local and state officials. These women's activism showcases how environmental justice movements are shaped by gender and race.

Contributions of Ecofeminism to Environmental Justice Movements

Challenging Patriarchal Structures in Environmental Movements

Ecofeminism challenges the patriarchal structures that dominate both environmental movements and global governance. By incorporating gender and race into the analysis of environmental issues, ecofeminism encourages more inclusive and intersectional approaches to environmental justice.

Empowerment of Marginalized Voices

Ecofeminism calls for the inclusion of marginalized voices, particularly women of color and indigenous women, in environmental decision-making processes. Empowering these communities not only strengthens environmental justice movements but also challenges traditional power structures that have historically excluded these groups.

Building Solidarity between Gender Justice and Environmental Activism

Ecofeminism fosters solidarity between movements for gender justice and environmental justice. By recognizing the interconnectedness of social, economic, and environmental justice, ecofeminism provides a framework for more holistic and inclusive environmental advocacy.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated how ecofeminism provides a powerful lens for understanding the intersection of gender, race, and environmental activism. By exploring case studies of women of color and indigenous women at the forefront of environmental justice movements, we have seen how ecofeminism challenges environmental degradation and social oppression simultaneously. Women, particularly those from marginalized communities, are essential to the success of environmental justice movements, and their activism is reshaping global environmental policies.

Future Implications

Future research should explore how ecofeminism can continue to inform and influence environmental policy and activism on a global scale. By integrating gender, race, and environmental concerns, ecofeminism offers a transformative approach to achieving justice for both people and the planet.

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