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Eco-Warriors: Women on the Front Lines of Environmental Justice

The degradation of the planet has disproportionately affected marginalized groups, exposing them to heightened environmental hazards. The environmental justice (EJ) movement seeks to uncover and address systemic inequities intensified by climate-driven disasters, industrial waste, occupational hazards, and other environmental injustices, while evolving to highlight the social dimensions of environmental harm and the intersection of identity markers such as race, class, and other social constructs with these challenges. While being among the most vulnerable to the impacts of the shifting climate, across the globe women are at the forefront of a critical battle: the fight for environmental justice. The main focus during the early stages of EJ were environmental racism and classism– particularly the expendability of low-income, non-white or indigenous communities. However, the role of gender has been less fully explored, particularly in terms of how it compounds or introduces specific environmental risks. Moreover, intersectionality amplifies these injustices, creating vulnerabilities that demand urgent attention. Women play a central role in environmental justice movements because their disproportionate exposure to environmental degradation——compounded by systemic inequalities and gendered health impacts——positions them uniquely as both victims of environmental injustice and leaders in advocating for systemic change.

To comprehend the unique contributions of women to climate activism, it is essential to examine the specific ways women—especially indigenous, non-white, and lower-income women—are disproportionately impacted by environmental harm. Kimberlé Crenshaw's groundbreaking concept of intersectionality, introduced in her essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," provides a critical framework for understanding how overlapping systems of oppression operate together, rather than in isolation. Originally, Crenshaw used the term "intersectionality" to describe the unique experiences of Black women at the intersection of racism and sexism. Over time, the concept has expanded to encompass other identities and forms of marginalization, highlighting how multiple factors can converge to exacerbate social and political inequalities. This perspective significantly influences how environmental justice scholars analyze the compounded effects of racism, classism, and sexism in perpetuating environmental injustices. Women face greater challenges than men in terms of environmental justice from the various social constructs that position them as dispensable in society, and this suffering guides their interventions in environmental equity.

Critical Environmental Justice as Theoretical Groundwork

The framework for Critical Environmental Justice is rooted in intersectionality and power dynamics, supplying an understanding of how gender politics inform interactions with and experience in the environment. In *What is Critical Environmental Justice* (2017), Environmental Studies scholar, David Naguib Pellow provides a nuanced analysis of the EJ movement, emphasizing its social and identity-based dimensions. He writes, "Environmental justice struggles reveal how power flows through the multi-species relationships that make up life on Earth, often resulting in violence and marginalization for the many and environmental privileges

for the few," (Pellow 11). This assertion highlights the deep-rooted power imbalances within social structures that perpetuate environmental injustice. Pellow argues that those in positions of power exploit marginalized groups (including non-humans), benefiting from their labor and resources while leaving them disproportionately vulnerable to environmental harm. The societal power imbalances between men and women contribute to increased environmental struggles. These struggles emphasize the importance of women-led and female-centered EJ activism, because those most vulnerable to harm have more impulse to contribute based on their lived experiences and willingness to see and address that lack of justice.

David Pellow's critical environmental justice framework expands the traditional EJ movement through four pillars that explore systematic disparities. These pillars highlight how intersecting social categories such as gender, race, class, and species shape environmental injustices, emphasizing the deep connections between social inequality and ecological harm. By advocating for transformative solutions and recognizing the value of both human and more-than-human actors, this framework challenges systems of domination that exploit marginalized communities and the environment alike:

> Critical Environmental Justice (EJ) Studies emphasizes several key perspectives: the interconnectedness of various social categories—such as race, gender, class, and species—in producing environmental injustices; the use of multiscalar approaches to analyze the spatial and temporal complexities of these issues; the recognition of deeply entrenched social inequalities reinforced by state power, necessitating transformative rather than reformist solutions; and a focus on the

> interdependence of human and more-than-human actors in creating sustainable and equitable futures (Pellow 26-27).

Of particular relevance is the first pillar, rooted in Crenshaw's intersectionality, which acknowledges how overlapping systems of oppression–such as patriarchy, racism, and capitalism– create compounded vulnerabilities. Pellow asserts, "Social inequality and oppression in all forms intersect, and actors in the more-than-human world are subjects of oppression and frequently agents of social change" (Pellow 27). Both Pellow and Crenshaw highlight the vital roles of women, particularly Black women, who are often situated at the crossroads of multiple oppressions, in driving global environmental justice movements. This has been a recurring theme throughout the history of the movement. Dollie Burwell and Hazel Johnson, often referred to as "the mothers of environmental justice," exemplify this leadership. They not only identified systemic inequities in their communities but also catalyzed significant change through their activism. Burwell played a key role in the 1982 protests against a hazardous waste landfill in Warren County, North Carolina, while Johnson founded the organization People for Community Recovery in 1979 to address environmental contamination in her Chicago neighborhood of Altgeld Gardens. Burwell's reflections in "Environmental Justice Comes Full Circle: Warren County Before and After" underscore this impact. She writes, "Perhaps most profoundly, [the Warren County struggle] led to local consciousness of environmental racism and a demand during the detoxification of the dump site for environmental justice," (Burwell et al. 36). This statement underscores how Black women leaders like Burwell mobilized their communities, transforming localized struggles into broader movements for environmental equity and systemic change. Additionally, Pellow's third pillar highlights that "social inequalities [...] are deeply

embedded in society (rather than aberrations)," (Pellow 30). These entrenched structures—patriarchal, exclusionary, and often racist—significantly influence the unequal environmental burdens placed on women. This perspective is essential for understanding the connection between women's social roles and their heightened vulnerability to environmental harm.

Social and Systemic Barriers to Environmental Justice

The cultural and social disparities faced by women are deeply rooted in structural injustices, as patriarchal systems perpetuate economic disadvantages that heighten women's vulnerability to environmental degradation. The exploitation of women's unpaid labor, particularly in caregiving and resource management, reflects the systemic devaluation of their contributions within patriarchal frameworks. Meike Spitzner explores this dynamic in her chapter of *Eco-Sufficiency and Global Justice: Women Write Political Ecology*, stating, "Women worldwide have almost exclusive responsibility for the care of other humans. As climate change sets in train harsh conditions and new scarcities threaten vulnerable groups, women's unfairly large (unpaid economic) workload will increase" (Spitzner 223). This dynamic extends to climate migration, where women often bear the brunt of environmental disasters and hazards, spending more time and energy ensuring basic needs like water, food, and health care are met. As primary caretakers, they are disproportionately affected when forced to leave their communities, becoming climate migrants in search of opportunities and resources, often at great personal cost. Inequalities that dictate women's disproportionate exposure to environmental degradation makes them especially vulnerable during ecological disasters. Ecofeminist writer and scholar, Greta Gaard highlights that "gender inequalities mean that women and children are 14 times more likely to die in ecological disasters than men,"(Gaard 23). This statistic underscores the systemic

ways women are disproportionately affected by such events. Limited access to essential resources—such as transportation, emergency supplies, or financial means to escape—exacerbates their vulnerability, a situation further perpetuated by patriarchal socioeconomic structures and the underrepresentation of women in policymaking. One stark example occurred during Hurricane Katrina in the U.S. when "African–American women—the poorest population in that part of the country —faced the greatest obstacles to survival. Women who survive climate change disasters are then faced with the likelihood of sexual assault: for example, after Hurricane Katrina, rapes were 'reported by dozens of survivors,'" (Gaard 23). The compounded impact of systemic inequalities and environmental disasters places an immense burden on women, forcing many to endure displacement, increased workloads, and heightened risks of exploitation and violence.

Further, as Charkiewicz (a Polish economist and social feminist) observes in *Eco-Sufficiency and Global Justice*, patriarchal systems tie women's labor to societal survival while devaluing it: "Capital endowed with sovereignty 'decides' who is disposable, and who can live. For the sovereign power was not only founded on *patria potestas*, a father's right to kill, but also on *cura materna*—the feminine duty to care" (Charkiewicz 83). This framing reveals the paradox of women's roles—they are essential for sustaining communities yet remain economically marginalized, highlighting the contradiction that drives their advocacy for systemic change. Sharon Lavigne is an exemplar of the EJ movement, whose work in Cancer Alley in Louisiana has been instrumental in highlighting the intersection of environmental and health disparities. Through her advocacy, Lavigne has brought attention to the severe environmental pollution affecting marginalized communities in this region and the health impacts on residents,

demanding greater accountability from industries. As noted, “Sharon Lavigne formed a coalition called RISE St. James in 2018 to oppose the Formosa complex on the grounds that it might harm community health. RISE St. James is a faith-based nonprofit with the mission of halting industrial development in the parish,” (Batiste 7). Despite the tragic circumstances they face, women have come to recognize that their survival is intertwined with the survival of their communities and sustainability in general, making advocacy not only a matter of personal survival but a critical pathway to broader social justice.

The intersection of socioeconomic status and environmental hazard exposure compounds environmental challenges. Single women and mothers face heightened financial inequalities, particularly as they shoulder the costs of climate adaptation, such as air conditioning installation or home repairs, which are often unattainable due to their economic marginalization. Spitzner underscores this reality, noting that “70 percent of the world’s poor are women, mostly unsupported mothers and elderly, lacking any social and economic capacity to adapt to unanticipated environmental impacts,” (Spitzner 223). This economic vulnerability not only limits women’s ability to respond to immediate environmental challenges but also entrenches long-term cycles of poverty and inequality, further exacerbating their disproportionate exposure to environmental risks. The gender pay gap and the undervaluation of women’s labor are further evidence of these systemic inequities. CARE (Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere), an international non-governmental organization, reports that “women work two-thirds of the world's working hours, produce half the world's food, and earn only 10% of the world's income; of the world's one billion poorest people, women and girls make up 70%,” (Gaard 23). These statistics highlight how systemic inequities, tied to both gender and class,

intersect with environmental injustices. Women, disproportionately represented among the poor, often bear the brunt of environmental health risks, such as toxic exposure living in poorer conditions, unsafe working conditions, and cannot keep up with the growing costs of climate adaptability, which are not only a matter of economic survival but also threaten their well-being. Meanwhile, those with wealth and power—who are less likely to suffer directly from ecological degradation—continue to profit from these conditions.

Gendered Health Impacts: Hormonal Disruptors and Occupational Hazards

Women working in factories, particularly in beauty product manufacturing and fashion face heightened exposure to toxic chemicals, perpetuating environmental injustices linked to gender. By prioritizing profit over safety, industries perpetuate cycles of exploitation and environmental injustice. Women often bear the health inequities associated with toxic exposure and unsafe working conditions, while those with wealth and power benefit economically and avoid the burdens of ecological degradation. While comprehensive data on reproductive risks and prevalence of occupational exposures by sex remains limited, "the workforce is generally segregated into typical male and female jobs and, thus, women tend to be exposed to different occupational hazards than men," (Women and Health). Women often face unequal occupational hazards and exposures, with a significant proportion of them working in factory settings. Fast fashion plants, particularly prevalent throughout Asia, are a primary concern as women are continuously exploited for cheap labor and exposed to specific occupational environmental hazards. Just as women were historically used and mistreated in labor roles, such as in early power mills, today "young, impoverished, lower-class, and uneducated women from rural Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and India (as well as China, Cambodia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Honduras,

and other countries in the Global South) continue to make clothing for the Global North" (Bose 3). Since the beauty and textile industries use and expose workers to toxic chemical agents, these working class women "who are predominantly women of color and immigrant women, can also face occupational health hazards from chemicals in professional cosmetic products and ad-hoc workplace safety standards," (Zota et al.). One, Endocrine-disrupting chemicals (EDCs), are a prime example of environmental health hazards that disproportionately affect women for the profit of large industries. These chemicals, which are commonly found in products such as plastics and pesticides– but namely in personal care products– can interfere with hormonal balance in women and contribute to a range of health issues, including reproductive and developmental problems. Environmental and exposure-related occupational hazards pose significant risks to women's reproductive health globally, particularly in countries that exploit female labor for industrial profits. Key exposures for women in these environments include:

- Organic solvents, linked to menstrual disorders, reduced fertility, pregnancy complications, and certain cancers in children of exposed workers.
- Heavy metals (e.g., lead), associated with increased miscarriages, neonatal deaths, prematurity, and low birth weight.
- Pesticides, connected to adverse effects on fertility, pregnancy, and offspring health ("Women and Health").

These unequal exposures highlight how women face disproportionately higher health risks in industrial and hazardous environments.

Women as International Changemakers and Stakeholders

Women are not merely victims of environmental injustice but also some of the most passionate advocates for environmental justice and climate activism, leading movements that address ecological harm and systemic inequities. Across diverse contexts, women have consistently emerged as central figures in environmental struggles, driven by their lived experiences and a deep understanding of the connection between ecological degradation and social injustice. This leadership is exemplified in various case studies. For example, the Love Canal protest movement, a landmark in environmental history, demonstrated how “female activism made powerful impressions at the state and local national levels,” (Newman 69). The women of Love Canal, many of them mothers concerned about their families' health, turned personal fear into collective action. Their efforts to gather data, raise awareness, and challenge government inaction were crucial in shaping environmental policy and public health discourse. As Newman highlights, the “LCHA created its own health survey, which sought to provide information to medical officials and governmental agencies and to verify the claims of residents themselves,” (Newman 69). This grassroots initiative not only empowered the community but also set a precedent for citizen-led science, emphasizing the importance of lived experiences in confronting environmental hazards and advocating for justice. While the Love Canal case study is a historical example from the 1970s, generally, those who are affected the most by a social problem will be the main agents for change, as Pellow argues in the first pillar of critical environmental justice theory. This pattern holds true in many cases. Women’s roles as environmental change makers transformed and stretched throughout the decades, driven by

pressing global challenges and pivotal moments in history. This evolution can be seen in key historical milestones that highlight women's growing influence in environmental advocacy:

> Although the 'first stirrings' of women's environmental defense were introduced at the United Nations 1985 conference in Nairobi, through news of India's Chipko movement involving peasant women's defense of trees (their livelihood), women's role in planetary protection became clearly articulated in November 1991, when the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) organized the World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet in Miami, Florida. (Gaard 21)

As illuminated by Gaard, women's environmental defense spurred from actions and conditions that immediately impacted their survival and livelihood, demonstrating the interconnectedness between being the target of environmental degradation and fueling the necessity for female-led action. Grassroots and local activism, exemplified by the Chipko Movement, has played a crucial role in shaping global environmental justice efforts, showcasing the power of community-driven, women-led initiatives:

> In the Chipko Movement, a unique process of sustained dialogue between workers and disaster victims in Garhwal led to women's involvement. As primary caretakers, women suffered losses from recurring floods and landslides, which highlighted the need for ecological preservation and motivated their support for the movement. (Jain)

This movement not only demonstrated the strength and resilience of women but also highlighted the interconnectedness between environmental and social issues. By advocating for the

preservation of ecological balance, the women involved in the Chipko Movement addressed the immediate threats to their livelihoods and took a stand for long-term environmental sustainability. This grassroots leadership underscores the importance of women in environmental justice movements worldwide, demonstrating how their lived experiences fuel their advocacy for sustainable and equitable solutions.

Simultaneously, the modern ecofeminist movement gained momentum in the United States, emphasizing the interconnectedness between the exploitation of women and the degradation of the environment. It is rooted in the belief that patriarchal systems contribute to both environmental destruction and gender inequality, and ecofeminism advocates for a more holistic and equitable approach to social and environmental justice. The movement highlights the disproportionate impact of environmental issues on marginalized communities, particularly women, and calls for sustainable practices that honor both ecological balance and human rights (Eco Sufficiency and Global Justice). Women-led and female-centric organizations arose out of these principles, namely, the WEDO (Women's Environment and Development Organization) established in 1991. Today, WEDO remains integral in highlighting women's voices and addressing environmentally specific gender issues. An example of this is their work in championing gender-responsive climate policies through global platforms like the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). WEDO has played a crucial role in creating an avenue for women's perspectives in climate negotiations, including its advocacy for the adoption of the Gender Action Plan (GAP) within the UNFCCC. This plan recognizes the unique vulnerabilities women face due to climate change and promotes their leadership in creating solutions. As a result of initiatives of this, "women are recognized as a 'Major Group' in

many UN processes, participating actively as NGOs, civil society representatives, and stakeholder dialogue participants," (Flavell 73). Through initiatives like GAP and continued advocacy, WEDO bridges grassroots movements with global platforms, ensuring women's voices drive equitable and sustainable climate action. Reflecting on the progress Röhr, expert in gender and climate policy who has represented LIFE (Lifestyle for Environment) at UNFCCC events and co-founded the global women's climate justice network, GenderCC, at COP13 in Bali, notes, "To get to end with gender into these processes, or women into the process, we had to take this approach as an entry point on women are the most vulnerable," (Flavell 109). This shift in focus—exemplified at the COP in Bali, where adaptation began to take precedence over mitigation—underscored the growing recognition of the gendered impacts of climate change. However, challenges remain. As Hemmati, an international climate justice activist, observed, "Women are still far from equal representation in decision-making" (Flavell 110), with many areas requiring a move from general statements to concrete, actionable recognition of gender-specific issues. Additionally, the women being presented and represented are typically educated within occupations tied to specific sectors, which might limit the inclusion of certain perspectives and voices that also deserve recognition.

Women, facing unique environmental vulnerabilities compounded by systemic challenges, are at the forefront of climate activism. Their engagement is not just a choice but a necessity, deeply rooted in the preservation of their livelihoods. Their unique vulnerabilities—exacerbated by systemic inequalities—necessitate their involvement in addressing the complex interplay of social, economic, and environmental challenges. By challenging patriarchal structures and advocating for sustainable solutions, women play a pivotal role in reshaping

policies and practices that perpetuate environmental harm. Their lived experiences, combined with their deep understanding of ecological issues, make them powerful agents for change. Moving forward, it is crucial to amplify women's voices and recognize their leadership in climate negotiations, policy-making, and grassroots activism. This not only ensures that solutions are more equitable and effective but also acknowledges the essential role that women play in building a sustainable and just future for all.

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