

# Theoretical analysis reflection paper



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## INTRODUCTION

Social movements are often regarded as spontaneous, emotional, and non-rational. In social movements literature, under the influence of traditional theories like Marxism, the spontaneity and non-rational character of the masses are often accepted as an axiom. Social movements are believed to displace political consciousness and reason, giving place to emotions and spontaneous decisions. In reality, few of these claims have realistic theoretical and practical grounds. Social movements are not spontaneous, as they emerge in conditions that favor their development and provide all necessary resources and infrastructure. Social movements are rational because their leaders must make reasonable decisions to leverage public and private resources and advance their goals. At the same time, social movements are always emotional since emotions serve as a binding force motivating social activists to move towards their objectives. Emotions are the glue keeping the most disconnected elements of social movement together. In this sense, ecofeminism is a perfect example of a social movement that combines the features of non-spontaneity, rationality, and emotionality. Ecofeminism is a social movement that has emerged on the basis of affluent feminist and environmentalist research; it is rationally oriented to build an egalitarian and ecological sustainable society and generate emotional energy to motivate its followers.

## ECOFEMINISM: THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

In order to see why social movements are not spontaneous but still emotional, a brief insight into the origins of ecofeminism need to be

provided. Ecofeminism first emerged in the middle of the 20th century, at the intersection of the rich feminist research and the growing environmental consciousness (Gaard 2011). Ecofeminism is generally assumed to have originated in Rachel Carson's work *Silent Spring* that was published in 1962 (Gaard 2011). As a social movement, ecofeminism took its form by the beginning of the 1970s, growing on the idea that gender oppression and environmental degradation were intricately related. The earliest ecofeminists "exposed the historical and cross-cultural persecution of women as legitimized by the various male-dominated institutions of religion, culture, and medical science, [...] linking the physical health of women and the environment with the recuperation of a woman-centered language and thought." (Gaard 2011: 28)

Today, the strength of these philosophic connections varies across different branches of ecofeminism. Still, the latter remains a fundamental social model for those, who see no solution to the environmental crisis in a society of male hegemony and patriarchal domination (Mellor 1996).

At present, not everyone agrees that ecofeminism is a social movement in its pure form. Sale (1987) wrote that ecofeminism could at best be regarded as a new, unique way to reconsider the fundamental premises of the world order. It could also be considered as a philosophy or trend, but not a social movement (Sale 1987). Whether or not ecofeminism is a social movement in its best theoretical sense is beyond the scope of this analysis. Suffice it to say, it is a global, powerful, perfectly organized social phenomenon that has generated massive support, and which, according to Diamond and Orenstein

(1991), can be fairly regarded as the carrier of the most essential social movement features.

## ECOFEMINISM: EMOTIONAL, NON-SPONTANEOUS, AND RATIONAL

### Ecofeminism Is Not Spontaneous

In the traditional social movements discourse, social movements are claimed to emerge spontaneously. Collective behaviors are frequently conceived as grievance-motivated, unplanned, and spontaneous (Robnett 1999). In reality, social movement processes are very similar to traditional organizational activities that normally have a rational and planned character (Robnett 1999). In other words, any social movement emerges on the basis of various preexisting philosophies and organizational/social structures, which further facilitate its rapid expansion and influences on the masses. This is actually the case of ecofeminism – a social movement that has its deep roots in the ideas of universalized oppression of nature and women. Those ideas were first developed during the Enlightenment era (Goldman & Schurman 2000). Ecological feminists passed a long way to develop and maintain a vision of what is currently called “ ecofeminism.”

Ecofeminism was not spontaneous but emerged when the conditions for its development and popularization were the most favorable. Between the 1960s and 1970s, ecological feminism resonated in two essential ways (Sandilands 2005). First, it grew from the intensive struggles of women in North America, including Lois Gibbs, who sought to uncover the hidden facets of environmental degradation and make it a national problem (Sandilands 2005). In that sense, ecofeminism was a better organized

version of a 500-member community that held demonstrations and rallies to prove their environmental point. Second, ecofeminism had to become a reasonable response to the emerging critiques of traditional feminism, which was claimed to be excessively focused on reproduction and childcare (Sandilands 2005). Ecofeminism provided a unique lens for reconsidering an intimate connection between women and nature. The history and development of ecofeminism as a social movement was very steady and quite promising and, despite certain ideological limitations, it could hardly be described as “spontaneous.”

### Ecofeminism Is Emotional

The example of ecofeminism is interesting in the sense that it shows how social movements can be non-spontaneous but, at the same time, emotional. In this context, ecofeminism exemplifies a unique and very promising connection of emotionality, rationality, and choice. Emotions are spontaneous, but it does not mean they can make other phenomena spontaneous. To a large extent, no social movement is possible without emotions. Yang suggests that emotions always accompany collective action (2007). The absence or presence of emotions, as well as their complexity and intensity, underpin every single element of collective movements (Yang 2007). Emotions work as an effective force binding already recruited participants; emotional commitments to a social movement idea contribute to the development of the cultural climates needed to sustain and implement social movement ideas (Robnett 1999).

The topic of emotions in ecofeminism is particularly important: in a social movement that was organized by women, emotions are expected to play one of the leading roles. Certainly, emotions present a serious difficulty in the analysis of any social movement: as anyone would expect, emotions are experienced individually, whilst social movements are inherently collective (Berezin 2002). Still, emotions are affective responses to some sort of destabilization (Berezin 2002). In case of ecofeminism, and as mentioned previously, these emotions are generated mainly by the reproduction critiques of feminism and the growing scope of environmental degradation. In ecofeminism, emotions create a so-called community of feeling. These emotions serve as the chief source of energy that supports its unity and cohesiveness. As a community of feeling, ecofeminism further intensifies members' emotional identification with its ideology (Berezin 2002). It works like a two-way street, in which members experience strong emotions in response to destabilization and receive even stronger emotional support by joining the ecofeminist polity. The very idea of ecofeminism is extremely sensitive and emotional because ecological feminism refers to an intimation and sensibility of women's concerns about nature (Romesh 2012).

### Ecofeminism Is Rational

That ecofeminism is emotional does not mean that it is also irrational. Even if emotions and spontaneity are at the heart of social movements' mobilization, they can hardly be called irrational (Robnett 1999). Emotions do contribute to the process of individual transformation and, probably, make individuals sacrifice their identities for the sake of joining a social movement (Robnett 1999). Still, in almost all cases, such decisions are as

rational as social movements themselves. Moreover, even the presence of certain irrational features in social movements is the sign of totally rational thinking, as the social and political myths that apply to the irrational facilitate political manipulations (Biehl 1991).

Kalyanee Mam's documentary titled *A River Changes Course* tells the story of two Cambodian women who, in their pursuit of human ideals, chose to lead a small ecological revolution. The documentary uncovers the essence of ecofeminism as not a political movement but a social movement based on humane ideals. This is one of the most rational choices ever made. The rational character of ecofeminism is justified, not by the presence of emotions that, in this case, function merely as a binding force, but by the need to mobilize adequate resources and constantly reconsider its ideals in light of the changing and emerging realities. Ecofeminists do not seek to exert extraordinary meanings on public or overthrow the parameters of the existing political systems (Rootes 1990). On the contrary, they seek to make their goals explicit and make the ecological future of the planet much more meaningful. The problem of ecofeminism is explicit and comprehensive: at the level of diagnostic framing, environmental degradation is assumed a problem of the patriarchal society. At the level of prognostic framing, ecofeminists envision an ideal society that is ecologically sustainable, egalitarian, without any sexual division of labor and life (Mellor 1996). Even if achieving the ideal state is problematic and the financial resources are lacking, ecofeminists use their remarkable social cohesion and unanimous activism (Buckingham 2009). These choices are rational and well weighed, also giving ecofeminism another chance to sustain in the coming decades.

## CONCLUSION

Ecofeminism is a bright example of a social movement, which is rational, non-spontaneous, and extremely emotional. The non-spontaneity of ecofeminism can be readily traced through its history and evolution: the movement emerged when the social and philosophic conditions favored its rapid expansion and popularization. Emotions serve as an effective force binding social activists together and contributing to the stability and cohesiveness of the ecofeminist polity. The rationality of ecofeminism is associated with resource mobilization and comprehensive meanings, which make it understandable and attractive to the public. All these features, probably, will help ecofeminism withstand the major pressures in the coming decades.