

Women and nature: An ecofeminist study of environmental conservation sustainability

Bilqis Amelia Devi Chinsya^{1*}, Zohaib Hassan Sain²

¹ Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia

² Superior University, Punjab, Pakistan

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Abstract:

Amid the global climate crisis, women who are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation are often excluded from ecological decision-making. Environmental exploitation coincides with the marginalization of women within patriarchal structures. As forests vanish and water becomes polluted, women's voices are silenced. The purpose of this study is to analyze the structural roots of patriarchy in ecological crises and the central role of women in environmental conservation for sustainability. Using an integrative critical literature review combined with in-depth interviews, secondary and primary data were thematically analyzed through triangulation to identify conceptual patterns, patriarchal power relations, and women's ecological knowledge in promoting environmental sustainability. The findings indicate that, first, patriarchy operates through structural mechanisms that constitute the shared root of gender inequality and ecological crises. Second, environmental exploitation represents the most dominant issue, accompanied by significant impacts and the subordination of women. Third, ecofeminism positions women as key actors in conservation, where women-led initiatives reduce environmental degradation while simultaneously empowering women. This study concludes that patriarchy constitutes the structural root of ecological crises; however, women-led conservation efforts can reduce environmental degradation while simultaneously strengthening women's empowerment. This study contributes to strengthening ecofeminism empirically by demonstrating gender inequality as a mediating factor and by proposing integrative policy recommendations.

Keywords:

Ecofeminism; Gender Equality; Environmental Conservation; Patriarchy; Women's Empowerment.



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*Corresponding author: Bilqis Amelia Devi Chinsya, Sociology Study Program, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia e-mail: bilqis.amelia.devi-2021@fisip.unair.ac.id

INTRODUCTION

The exploitation of women and nature is a globally interconnected structural issue that is continuously reproduced within contemporary social systems. Buckingham (2015), Seren (2023), and Wahyono (2024) emphasize that this exploitative relationship is reinforced by the interaction between patriarchy and capitalism, producing dual domination over women's bodies and natural resources. Patriarchy positions women in subordinate roles, while capitalism exploits these inequalities to extract women's labor and environmental resources for economic gain (Rowland, 2015; Wieczorek, 2018; Limoudehi & Bakhtvar, 2020). In this context, women, particularly in rural areas, are the most vulnerable group to the impacts of environmental degradation, including deforestation, water pollution, and climate change (Workneh, 2020; Filho et al., 2023; Sullivan & Hickel, 2023). Thus, the structural interconnection between gender oppression and ecological degradation demands an integrative and transformative approach to solutions.

Several previous studies have highlighted the emergence of ecofeminist scholarship as a critical response to patriarchal power relations by positioning women as central actors in environmental conservation. Several studies emphasize women's significant roles in natural resource management and in advocating ecological justice (Bangun, 2020). Hosseinneshad (2017) found that women tend to demonstrate stronger environmental commitments through energy-efficient practices and waste management. Nofrima et al. (2023) further emphasize women's roles as agents of change in the context of climate change and sustainable development. Globally, this role is reflected in the Green Belt Movement in Kenya and the Chipko Movement in India, both of which successfully mobilized local communities against environmental degradation (Singh, 2018; Nguyen & Rydstrom, 2018; Tran, 2021; Riady, 2021). In the Indonesian context, Purwanto et al. (2020), Niko et al. (2023), and Niko et al. (2024) argue that the traditional ecological knowledge of Dayak women constitutes a crucial foundation for conservation practices.

Based on previous studies, the current research addresses gaps related to patriarchy as a common root, high environmental exploitation, and the central role of women in conservation. However, the research gap lies in the limited empirical studies measuring the mediating mechanism of gender inequality, the lack of integration of women's ecological knowledge into formal policies, and the absence of longitudinal intervention models based on women-led conservation. Duru et al. (2022), Bryan et al. (2024), and Niko (2017) also argue that the lack of comprehensive integration between social, cultural, and ecological dimensions causes women's potential as agents of change in local contexts to be overlooked. Accordingly, the novelty of this study lies in its empirical examination of gender inequality as a mediator, the integration of women's ecological knowledge into formal policy, and the development of a women-led longitudinal conservation intervention model.

Accordingly, this study investigates three key research questions. First, how does the patriarchal structure shape women's relations with nature? Second, what are its impacts on environmental sustainability? Third, how do women's agencies and ecological knowledge contribute to conservation efforts and the transformation of gender-equitable environmental policies? The study analyzes the structural linkages between patriarchal domination, women's environmental relations, and the role of their ecological knowledge within the frameworks of ecofeminism and conservation sustainability. It argues that patriarchal power structures simultaneously shape gender inequalities and drive environmental exploitation, while women emerge as key agents of change through their practices, resistance, and ecological knowledge. The study contributes theoretically by demonstrating the interconnectedness of ecological crises and gender injustices, and empirically by providing evidence of women's roles in

transforming community-based conservation and environmental governance for greater equity and sustainability.

METHOD

Research Approach

This study employs a critical integrative literature review approach combined with in-depth interviews, enabling the integration of conceptual and empirical findings to understand how gender-based power relations shape women's environmental practices and roles. Following Bowen (2009) and Snyder (2019), the literature review is conducted to identify patterns, discourse trends, and conceptual gaps, which are further enriched through field data. Specifically, this study aims to comprehensively analyze the structural interconnections between patriarchal domination, women environment relations, and women's ecological knowledge within an ecofeminist framework and conservation sustainability.

Data Sources

The research data consist of both secondary and primary sources. Secondary data include peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and relevant environmental and development reports related to ecofeminism and conservation, selected based on thematic relevance and academic credibility (George, 2008; Grewal et al., 2016). Primary data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 10 informants directly involved in women's empowerment and environmental conservation initiatives. Data triangulation was conducted by integrating both data types to enrich theoretical analysis with empirical insights and to represent diverse perspectives on women environment relations.

Literature Selection

The collected literature was systematically evaluated to assess its relevance to the study's focus and objectives, with particular emphasis on ecofeminist scholarship. Drawing on Regmi et al. (2016) and Christou (2023), the literature review prioritizes critical appraisal of relevance, conceptual contribution, and analytical rigor. Cullen and Brennan (2021) as well as Kozinets and Seraj-Aksit (2024) serve as references for selecting sources that represent diverse perspectives. Accordingly, the selected sources ensure substantive relevance and academic diversity, particularly within the ecofeminist framework.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using iterative thematic analysis following the six phases proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006), namely familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This process involved identifying, comparing, and categorizing themes derived from ecofeminist literature and interview data. The main themes include patriarchal domination, women nature relations, traditional ecological knowledge, and conservation sustainability. Interview findings not only confirmed but also enriched and critically engaged with the literature by revealing empirical field dynamics. The critical synthesis of literature review and informants' narratives generated a comprehensive understanding of conceptual patterns, analytical tendencies, and relational dynamics, thereby highlighting women's role as central actors in environmental sustainability from an ecofeminist perspective.

Conceptual Framework

This study develops a conceptual framework to interpret the relationships among core concepts, drawing on Sutton and Austin (2015) and Reed et al. (2021), as well as pattern mapping approaches proposed by Tenny et al. (2022) and Naeem et al. (2023). Interview data

further enrich this framework by reflecting the lived experiences and practices of informants, thereby illustrating how patriarchal structures, women nature relations, and traditional ecological knowledge collectively contribute to context-specific conservation sustainability.

Analytical Rigor

Analytical rigor was ensured through strict literature selection, iterative thematic comparison, and an integrative synthesis of academic perspectives and interview data. The consolidation of credible sources and field findings strengthened the study's validity, while cross-examination of arguments, conceptual positions, and informants' narratives produced conclusions that are logical, evidence-based, and in-depth, in accordance with qualitative research standards.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Patriarchal domination and its implications for women

Patriarchy is a system that constructs women and nature as legitimate entities to be dominated. This system not only produces gender inequality but also simultaneously legitimizes ecological exploitation. Through mechanisms of hierarchical social construction, dichotomous role division, functional normalization, and structural parallelism between women's subordination and nature's marginalization, patriarchy contaminates socio-ecological relations. This power logic is further legitimized as something "natural".

Table 1

Patriarchal Domination of Women

No	Thematic Dimension	Findings	Implications	Key References
1	Social Construction	Women and nature are socially constructed as subordinate entities within patriarchal systems, legitimizing control, marginalization, and exploitation.	Reinforces structural inequalities and justifies discriminatory practices against women and environmental degradation, thereby necessitating transformative social and cultural interventions.	Ernanda (2023); Ozden (2023)
2	Gender Hierarchy	Patriarchy operates as a gender-based caste system that systematically positions women in lower and marginalized social strata.	Limits women's access to resources, decision-making processes, and social mobility, perpetuating unequal power relations across generations.	Mosse (2018); Mal & Saikia (2024)
3	Role Division	Gender-based division of roles confines women to the private sphere while granting men dominance in public, political, and economic domains.	Restricts women's participation in leadership, governance, and economic development, reducing opportunities for gender-inclusive social progress.	Figuerola et al. (2023); Idrus et al. (2023)
4	System Normalization	Patriarchal structures are normalized through functionalist logic, framing gendered roles as socially necessary and natural.	Obscures systemic discrimination by presenting inequality as normal, making gender-transformative reforms more difficult to implement.	Ali & Naylor (2013); Strid & Hearn (2022)
5	Environmental Parallel	The marginalization of women parallels the treatment of nature as an object of exploitation, reflecting a shared	Highlights the interconnected nature of gender justice and environmental sustainability, supporting ecofeminist	Ottuh (2020); Mascarenhas et al. (2024)

patriarchal logic of domination.	approaches to social and ecological transformation.
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Source: Compiled and analyzed by the author, 2024.

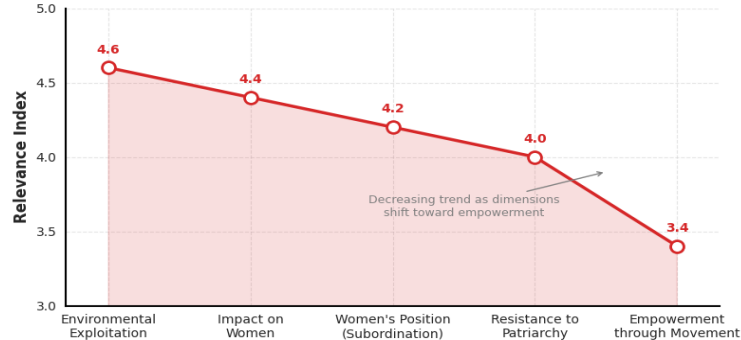
Table 1 shows that patriarchy operates through several dimensions. First, social construction positions women and nature as subordinate entities, thereby legitimizing exploitation. Second, gender hierarchy functions as a caste-like system that marginalizes women into lower social strata. Third, role division confines women to the domestic sphere, while men dominate public, political, and economic domains. Fourth, this structure is normalized through a functionalist logic that frames gender inequality as natural. Fifth, the marginalization of women parallels the treatment of nature as an object of exploitation, both reflecting the same logic of patriarchal domination. Collectively, these dimensions demonstrate that patriarchy not only oppresses women but also damages nature through structured and naturalized mechanisms of power.

Based on the findings, five thematic dimensions illustrate how patriarchy operates as an interconnected system of domination. First, social construction shows that the subordination of women and nature is socially produced rather than biologically determined, thereby legitimizing exploitation. Second, gender hierarchy positions women in marginalized social strata while privileging men within power structures. Third, role division confines women to domestic responsibilities and grants men dominance in political, economic, and public spheres. Fourth, system normalization sustains inequality by portraying gendered roles as natural and socially necessary, making them resistant to challenge. Finally, environmental parallelism highlights the shared logic underlying the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature, both of which are treated as objects of control and use. Together, these dimensions reinforce one another to form a coherent patriarchal system that simultaneously reproduces gender inequality and contributes to ecological degradation, demonstrating the inseparable relationship between social and environmental justice.

Relationship between women and the environment

Women are the group most affected by environmental degradation; however, their empowerment capacity remains low due to strong patriarchal structures. Although resistance through advocacy and social movements continues to emerge, women’s participation is still constrained by systems that reproduce both subordination and environmental exploitation. This condition indicates that the limitation of women’s agencies is not due to the absence of resistance, but rather the systematic dominance of patriarchy that weakens women’s position in ecological conservation. The data are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Summary of Interviews on Women and the Environment



Source: taken from interviews, 2024.

Figure 1 shows that the Environmental Exploitation dimension has the highest index (4.6), followed by the Impact on Women (4.4) and Women's Position (Subordination) (4.2). This indicates that informants perceive environmental degradation as the most relevant issue, with women bearing disproportionate impacts due to patriarchal systems. The Resistance to Patriarchy dimension scores 4.0, indicating active forms of women's resistance. Meanwhile, Empowerment through Movements records the lowest index (3.4), reflecting persistent structural barriers. The higher the index, the stronger the perceived relevance of each dimension within the ecofeminist framework.

Based on the research findings, the Environmental Exploitation dimension is considered the most relevant, indicating that informants view environmental degradation as a direct consequence of a profit-oriented extractive development system. These ecological impacts are disproportionately experienced by women, particularly in social, economic, and health aspects. The Subordination of Women dimension reflects how patriarchal power relations limit women's participation in environmental decision-making, paralleling the perception of nature as a passive entity to be controlled. Nevertheless, the findings also reveal women's agencies through resistance to patriarchy in community-based environmental advocacy and movements, although empowerment through such movements remains significantly constrained by persistent structural barriers. These barriers include limited access to resources, lack of institutional support, and deeply embedded cultural norms. Overall, environmental sustainability and gender justice are closely and intrinsically interconnected. Therefore, addressing ecological crises requires an integrative ecofeminist approach that positions women not merely as vulnerable victims but as strategic actors in equitable, inclusive, and transformative environmental governance.

Nature connectivity and women: Traditional roles and ecological knowledge

Environmental crises are not only related to ecological degradation but also to power relations that produce environmental injustice. In many contexts, patriarchal structures place women in the most vulnerable position to the impacts of environmental degradation while simultaneously limiting their participation in decision-making processes. However, women play a crucial role in sustaining natural resources through ecological knowledge and practices that are passed down across generations. The following table presents the main dimensions of gender-based environmental injustice from an ecofeminist perspective.

Table 2

The Role of Women and Ecological Knowledge

No	Analytical Dimension	Analytical Focus	Ecofeminist Implications	Key References
1	Women as Guardians of Nature	Women's roles in managing water, food, and local natural resources	Women's ecological knowledge constitutes a critical asset for community-based conservation	Gough et al. (2024)
2	Resistance to Environmental Exploitation	Women's leadership in opposing environmentally destructive development projects	Women act as frontline agents resisting patriarchal and extractive development logics	Mathur et al. (2023)
3	Empowerment through Environmental Action	Linkages between environmental conservation and women's economic and political empowerment	Environmental sustainability and gender justice are mutually reinforcing	Presbey (2013)

4	Integration of Gender and Ecology	Holistic approaches connecting gender relations with ecological degradation	Environmental injustice cannot be separated from gender-based inequality	Mondal & Majumder (2019); Liu (2024)
5	Advocacy for Sustainable Development	Promotion of inclusive and socially just development paradigms	The oppression of women and nature stems from shared structures of domination	Holy et al. (2021); Dong & Kim (2022)
6	Constructing New Environmental Narratives	Challenging views that frame women and nature as resources or subordinate entities	Ecofeminism calls for paradigm shifts toward ethical and relational sustainability	Chircop (2008); Sharnappa (2016)

Source: Compiled and analyzed by the author, 2024.

Table 2 shows that ecofeminism positions women as central actors in the relationship between gender and the environment. The six dimensions include: (1) women's role as guardians of nature; (2) resistance to environmental exploitation; (3) empowerment through environmental action; (4) integration of gender and ecology; (5) advocacy for sustainable development; and (6) the construction of new environmental narratives. Each dimension highlights how women's ecological knowledge, leadership in grassroots movements, and the link between gender justice and ecological sustainability form the foundation for a transformative approach to environmental crises.

Based on the findings, the study reveals that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature originate from the same fundamental logic of patriarchal domination. Women are not only the group most disproportionately affected by environmental degradation experiencing losses in health, livelihood, and social well-being but also possess significant capacity to act as agents of change through their local ecological knowledge and collective resistance movements. These findings strongly reinforce the ecofeminist thesis that gender justice and environmental sustainability are intrinsically inseparable and must be addressed together. Consequently, policy interventions and social movements that focus solely on technical ecological solutions such as reforestation or pollution control without simultaneously challenging and dismantling patriarchal structures remain fundamentally incomplete and ineffective. An integrative, transformative approach that empowers women politically, economically, and socially while actively protecting nature is therefore not merely desirable but absolutely essential for achieving lasting and equitable environmental governance.

Discussion

This study, *Women and Nature: An Ecofeminist Study of Environmental Conservation Sustainability*, concludes that, first, patriarchy operates through structural mechanisms that constitute the shared root of gender inequality and ecological crises. Second, environmental exploitation shows the highest level of relevance, accompanied by women's subordination and disproportionate impacts, while empowerment through collective movements remains the lowest due to structural barriers. Third, ecofeminism positions women as central actors, where women-led conservation reduces environmental degradation while strengthening their empowerment. Accordingly, the study confirms patriarchy as the structural root of ecological crises. High environmental exploitation and women's subordination are closely interlinked, while weak collective empowerment reflects persistent structural constraints. Ecofeminism thus offers women-led conservation as a pathway to restore nature and liberate women from oppression.

This finding is highly relevant to contemporary social issues, particularly amid the escalating climate crisis, extractivism, and ecological disasters, whose impacts are disproportionately borne by women in agrarian and coastal communities (Shiva, 1989; Plumwood, 1993). In many regions, profit-oriented extractive development continues without involving women in decision-making processes, despite women being the most affected by water pollution, food scarcity, and loss of access to forests (Ali & Naylor, 2013; Ruslin, 2022). Social realities indicate that gender-biased environmental policies and patriarchal structures in resource governance remain major barriers, resulting in the marginalization of women's voices and ecological knowledge (Ernanda, 2020; Woehrle, 2022). Thus, this study highlights the urgent need to recognize the interconnection between gender injustice and environmental degradation as a unified social problem that must be addressed simultaneously.

Based on the ecofeminist framework, this finding affirms that the logic of patriarchal domination which separates culture from nature, rational from emotional, and public from domestic constitutes the shared root of both women's subordination and environmental exploitation (Warren, 1994; Plumwood, 1993). The researcher interprets that women are not inherently "closer to nature" due to biological factors, but rather because of socially constructed domestic roles that, in turn, generate practical ecological knowledge and lived experience in managing everyday resources (Salleh, 1991; Merchant, 2006). Furthermore, the finding on women's agency as a balancing force indicates that resistance and advocacy carried out by women are not merely responses to environmental degradation, but also symbolic and practical challenges to patriarchal norms themselves (Shiva, 1989; Clark, 2012). Therefore, the transformation of socio-ecological relations is only possible if patriarchal structures are transformed, rather than relying solely on technical environmental interventions.

This study provides an understanding that gender justice and ecological sustainability are inseparable, as both represent two sides of the same coin: a struggle against the logic of domination. The researcher recognizes that development approaches focused solely on economic growth and technological advancement, without questioning patriarchal power relations, will continue to perpetuate women's vulnerability and environmental degradation (Morrison et al., 2024; Gonzalez-Grandon et al., 2024). Moreover, the study demonstrates that women are not merely passive victims, but strategic agents with the capacity to lead conservation efforts, build community-based movements, and create more inclusive and ethical development alternatives (Warren, 2001; Plumwood, 1993). The recognition of women's local ecological knowledge and the appreciation of their historical experiences provide an important lesson for avoiding universalistic and technocratic biases in research and policy.

Compared with previous studies that emphasise the relationship between women and nature, such as Bendels et al. (2018) and Fortnam et al. (2019) on the feminisation of nature, and Agarwal (2009) on women's participation in forest management, this study offers a novel contribution by positioning women's agency more explicitly as a transformative force that actively challenges patriarchal norms, rather than merely adapting to existing resource-management practices (Presbey, 2013; Rynbrandt & Deegan, 2002). While earlier studies have tended to be philosophical and descriptive, this research employs a systematic variable-based analysis, thereby enabling a more structured assessment of how patriarchy, gender inequality, and ecological degradation are mutually mediated (Arun & Subbiah, 2020; Johnson, 2022). In addition, this study highlights a moderating mechanism in the form of empowerment through conservation and community-based movements, an aspect that has not been extensively elaborated in classical ecofeminist scholarship.

Based on the empirical findings, the following policy and action recommendations are formulated. First, governments and development institutions must substantively integrate gender perspectives into all environmental policies, including spatial planning, natural resource management, and ecological disaster response. Second, women's empowerment programs should include environmental leadership training, access to community-based conservation funding, and guaranteed representation of women at all levels of decision-making. Third, a moratorium on environmentally destructive extractive projects that disregard women's rights should be urgently implemented and replaced with a collective green economy approach. Fourth, educational institutions and media should promote new narratives linking gender justice and ecological sustainability, while recognizing women's local ecological knowledge. Fifth, sustained institutional support including funding, legal assistance, and safe spaces for women activists must be provided to strengthen women-led community-based environmental movements.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that patriarchy is not merely a system of gender inequality but also a structural root of ecological crises. Its operation through mechanisms of social construction, gender hierarchy, domestic public role division, functionalist normalization, and the parallel exploitation of women and nature produce a structured and naturalized logic of domination. Environmental exploitation emerges as the most relevant dimension, accompanied by disproportionate impacts experienced by women and their subordination in environmental decision-making processes. However, empowerment through collective movements remains at the lowest level, indicating strong structural barriers that constrain women's collective agency. Nevertheless, the study finds that women are not passive victims; they possess valuable local ecological knowledge and act as agents of change. Women-led conservation efforts are shown to reduce environmental degradation while simultaneously strengthening their socio-economic and political empowerment. Thus, gender justice and ecological sustainability are inseparable dimensions.

This study contributes to strengthening the ecofeminist framework by empirically demonstrating that gender inequality functions as a structural mediator between patriarchy and environmental exploitation. It also highlights a moderate mechanism in the form of empowerment through conservation and community-based movements, which can disrupt the chain of domination. In practical terms, the study offers integrative policy recommendations, including gender mainstreaming in environmental policies, targeted empowerment programs for women, a moratorium on extractive projects, the dissemination of new narratives through education and media, and sustained institutional support for women's movements. Thus, this research not only enriches academic discourse but also provides actionable guidance for policymakers and environmental activists.

This study has several limitations. First, its geographical scope and specific socio-cultural context limit the generalizability of the findings to societies with different patriarchal structures. Second, the approach primarily emphasizes perceptions and relevance indices and therefore does not capture longitudinal changes in gender relations and ecological conditions resulting from specific interventions. Third, the study does not deeply explore variations in women's agencies across social class, ethnicity, and generational differences. Accordingly, future research is recommended to conduct cross-cultural and cross-regional comparative studies, employ long-term mixed-method designs, and experimentally test the effectiveness of conservation-based empowerment models. In addition, future studies should also examine

how men and masculinities can be engaged in transforming more equitable socio-ecological relations.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Bilqis Amelia Devi Chinsya: Conceptualization; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Project Administration; Writing Original Draft. **Zohaib Hassan Sain:** Conceptualization; Formal Analysis; Validation; Visualization; Writing Review & Editing.

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