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## Response to Agarwal

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# Response

Paul Gerdes

In her essay, Professor Bina Agarwal makes some excellent observations about the condition of environmental and gender relations in the Indian context. Her analysis begins with sharp observations on the difficult circumstances faced by women; she then asserts that our understanding has not been improved by the extensive literature of ecofeminism. She pinpoints some of the flaws in this discourse and concludes by presenting her own recommendation for an advancement of theory as well as the condition of women in South Asia.

## I. Important Insights

According to this work, one of the problems for both women and the environment is that the discourse of ecofeminism has not served as the corrective it claimed to be. The focus of Professor Agarwal's criticism is the works of Carolyn Merchant and Vandana Shiva, but she addresses other ecofeminist authors as well. She is very critical of ecofeminism on these accounts: the historical and ideological links between women's subordination and that of the environment, as well as the question of women's agency.

Professor Agarwal challenges one major principle of ecofeminism: that domination of women and domination of the environment happened simultaneously. Whether set in the context of the Scientific Revolution, as explained by Carolyn Merchant, or with colonialism, as with Vandana Shiva, this link, according to Professor Agarwal, is tenuous. Professor Agarwal argues that prior to these events, gender relations were replete with inequalities. Consequently, there is little evidence of a paradigmatic shift in human/nature relations or those of gender, correlative with these otherwise historic developments.

Another criticism she makes is that ecofeminism overestimates the level of power women have. In many places in the Third World, women are legally blocked from even holding land, and they have the dual burden of agricultural work and childcare. This translates into little time for attending meetings. Even in the cases where women are involved in policy meetings, they are rarely listened to, and therefore become timid about participating. This is as true now as it was before the onset of both colonialism and the Scientific Revolution.

This analysis leads Professor Agarwal to ecofeminism's critical flaw: policies based on its premises will not improve the situation of women. Ecofeminism calls for a return to traditional practices, but these practices create situations neither of equality nor of ecological harmony. In addition, Professor Agarwal states, these flaws mean that there is no common agenda between the ecological and feminist movements. She provides excellent examples of strides made in the environmental sphere, such as the Chipko Movement in India, that have not led to improvements in the status of women. Also, many of the prescriptions for policy do not address the fact that most women in the Third World already have a heavier work burden than men; therefore, giving them the task of "mothering the Earth" is impractical because it means an increase in workload.

Professor Agarwal also takes issue with ecofeminism's assumption of a special relationship between women and nature. According to her, whenever one's livelihood is in danger, everyone has a stake in maintaining the environment. Therefore, she asserts, people will work to change the environmental situation when it directly affects them, so long as they have the power to do so.

For Professor Agarwal, the capacitation of women must begin at home. Within this sphere, women can push for more power in decision-making, and an equitable distribution of work. It is, of course, necessary to do so with the goal of increasing women's independence and autonomy. The argument continues by saying that women, once they have established an improved bargaining position within the home, can make a greater impact on policy decisions. Further initiatives can then be made in establishing both woman-friendly legislation and greater access to economic resources. Professor Agarwal reminds us that any empowerment of women depends on effective women's organizations and gender-progressive agendas.

## II. Questions and Criticisms

Although there are several places where globalization is implicit in Professor Agarwal's paper, it is never made explicit. I am interested in the consequences Professor Agarwal sees resulting from the phenomenon. For example: What *is* globalization in the context of feminist environmentalism? What effects of globalization does Professor Agarwal foresee? (I will provide my own perspective later in my response.)

While Professor Agarwal challenges ecofeminism in a number of important ways, she nonetheless overlooks a key item in the analytical

arsenal of those she quarrels with—the link between women and the environment through language. The basic point is this: Many ecofeminists show proof of an association between women and the environment by suggesting how the language of one is also used in the sphere of the other. For instance, women are referred to as cows, bitches, foxes, chicks, old bats, old hens, etc. Some environmental terms are Mother Nature, the rape of nature, and virgin timber.<sup>1</sup> Most significant here is how the link between degradation of women and that of the environment are intimated in the same breath.

I disagree with a few of Professor Agarwal's points. First, she asserts that men and women should have an equal role in improving the environment. This would certainly be ideal, but is it realistic? If women are the group most harmed by the status quo, would they not need to press harder? For instance, if the river near a family is more polluted, women and children suffer more than men, because it is largely their task to collect the water. Women and children are the predominant victims of water-borne illnesses such as malaria, river blindness, and elephantiasis.<sup>2</sup> In many cases, women and children drink water directly from the river, while men drink it only once it has been boiled. Is it not a valid point, then, that women have a much greater stake in the improvement of the environment? If so, given small amounts of government resources, would it not be more important to attack the very urgent need—the environment—and have gender issues take a secondary place? If we do not accept the linkages between the domination of women and the environment, then we must choose to give one priority over the other. Professor Agarwal's choice seems to be to give the priority to female issues. However, in many parts of the world, including the Brazilian Amazon and Indonesia, environmental devastation has reached levels where it must be the first and foremost priority.

Another point of contention in the essay concerns solutions to the problem. Professor Agarwal advocates, as a first step, a change in the bargaining that women do within the household. When they have improved their position there, they can work for more political power and lobby for environmental concerns using their superior knowledge of the situation. I see several obstacles to her solution.

First, she is critical of ecofeminism for overestimating the agency of women in the political sphere. Why does the same analysis not apply within the sphere of the household? For women to acquire for a better bargaining position, many factors must come into alignment. Psychol-

ogist Abraham Maslow has argued that humans operate on a hierarchy of needs and wants. Accordingly, people who are concerned with feeding themselves and their families cannot spend much time worrying about improving gender relations. This fits with my experiences in rural northeastern Brazil. The women I met there were not overly concerned with the question of oppression. Of much more concern to them was the question of feeding their family every day. Studies have shown that women become worried about the environment when its ability to produce food for them declines. This, though, is only the first obstacle. For an improved bargaining situation, the women must then be aware of their male-dominated culture and the fact that it oppresses them. They must be willing to question the value of their community, and ask their husbands to do proportionately more work and to listen to them on political questions. They need to have more clout to push husbands who prove to be recalcitrant, if not totally oppositional. Can this happen? How do women's organizations and gender progressive agendas get started? How do they effect the bargaining process? Can we expect the situation to improve from the household base when it has been so unequal for hundreds of years? I feel that Professor Agarwal left these questions unsatisfactorily addressed.

### **III. Ecofeminism vs. Feminist Environmentalism**

#### **A. Globalization**

I would now like to advance some of my own ideas on globalization. Since the term is so complex, I will provide a definition for use here: Globalization is the growing interconnectedness of the world. It manifests itself in many forms. In the sphere of economics, it means increased inter- and transnational activities. Trade is becoming more fluid than ever before with associations such as the European Union, NAFTA, and Mercosul. It is now easier to move money from one continent to another and to hold foreign currency. The nation-state has declined in power relative to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and transnational corporations. In terms of the flow of information, globalization includes a broadening and a quickening of knowledge transfer. The mention of globalization has been frequent throughout this Roundtable. However, it has generally been referred to in a negative light. I am going to look at both the positive and negative sides. On one hand, it can have a uniting effect in the world in that people in

distant lands can now communicate in a split second. It can also have a polarizing effect, however, and promote a movement toward strengthening local groups at the expense of long-distance relationships. This occurs because the knowledge of an “other” outside of the local area can unite local people against a common enemy; it is the logic of ethnic nationalism. Also, globalization can have many economic, distributional, ethical, and environmental effects. Some can be positive, others damaging.

Once globalization has been brought into the discussion, we need to apply it to the environment and women’s rights. I assert that globalization will be both good and bad for each cause.

*Tenho muito medo que o motosserra chegue aqui. A corta destes árvores iria muito mais rápido com a motosserra.*

I am very frightened of the chainsaw arriving here. The cutting of these trees will proceed much more quickly if the chainsaw arrives.<sup>3</sup>

The deforestation occurring in the Brazilian Amazon is rapid. Parts of the states of Amazonia and Pará are already uninhabitable. In other areas, heavy clouds of smoke have closed schools and airports and made people pass out. However, this comment forces us to think about the possibility of further increasing the rate of damage by several factors. Technology like the chainsaw would speed up deforestation. I spoke with sawmill owners who were trying to pool enough money to buy one. It would increase their productivity and, therefore, profits. Currency is hard to come by in the rain forest; most of the economy is based on barter and credit. One of the few ways to earn money is to sell timber. It is also not difficult to imagine a hardware company seeing the potential for profit in the Amazonian market and selling chainsaws there. However, the effects on the environment could be disastrous.

On the other hand, globalization could have a very positive impact on women’s and environmental issues. To the extent that there is ignorance of the damage being done to the environment, information can be more easily passed on to the residents. Media such as television and radio can show the devastation in other parts of the country. Also, women whose rights are being violated can band together using NGOs as an ally in their collective endeavors. Of course, the important factor that must be remembered here is the paramount importance of the

locals. NGOs that come into an area and tell the people how to run their areas and their lives have little success.

## **B. Improvements to the Status Quo**

I found Professor Agarwal's solution for improving the bargaining position of women to be instructive. To the extent that women are closer to the environment than men, a modification of gender relations would increase the chance of protecting the environment. Despite the obvious attractions, though, it seems to be a very difficult first step. Professor Agarwal mentions the aid of NGOs and nonlocal state institutions. She does not, however, go into detail on these issues and the particulars of these institutions, although she has written on this issue in other forums. My personal view is that the best help might be found not in international aid projects but in projects developed within the country by and for the people. I focus my following remarks on two very different institutions that may prove to be good examples.

### *1. GRUMIN*

GRUMIN (Grupo Mulher-Educação Indígena, or the Women's Group for Indigenous Education) is an organization of Brazilian Indian women with the agenda of ameliorating a huge number of problems that they face. Despite the fact that many of them are illiterate, they have been able to band together and gain an international voice for their concerns. They assert that they are still suffering from some of the institutions created by the Portuguese during colonization, and argue that they were once a part of an egalitarian system that was in balanced coexistence with nature. Now, they argue, the social system discriminates against them, and they have frequently been thrown off their land in the name of "development." However, they are now able to mount a challenge: they are speaking out on radio and television and in print, and they are attending UN conferences.

The actions of GRUMIN show the strength that a local group can acquire through organized solidarity and dedication. While the central cause of GRUMIN is the rights of indigenous peoples, the same principle could be used for other purposes.

## 2. Grameen Bank

An example of the recent phenomenon of microlending, the Grameen Bank was founded by a Bangladeshi university professor with the goal of providing credit to peasants. (Other similar organizations are ACCION and FINCA, which operate largely in the Americas.) The bank has had many effects, aside from its stated goal of improving the situation of poverty in Bangladesh. The system has been remarkably successful in that it has a 97-percent payback rate, roughly that of the Chase Manhattan Bank in New York.<sup>4</sup> The founder, Muhammad Yunus, argues that this is a much better solution to the poverty in the country than government aid programs, which usually increase wealth disparity. For instance, the World Bank has loaned \$25 billion to the Bangladeshi government over the past twenty years, yet poverty has *increased* during that time. Yunus argues that investment by the population is a far better solution than throwing money at the problem as the UN, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund (IMF) have been known to do.

Ninety-four percent of the borrowers from the Grameen Bank are women. The explanation has little to do with feminist theory or unequal rights. Yunus explains that women are simply more reliable as clients because they have a closer link to the family. It is they who have to fight to feed the family—and sometimes deceive and beg to do so. Therefore they are more dedicated to fulfilling an obligation that, in the end, helps their family: “If you wanted development in terms of quality of life—education, housing, sanitation, . . . these [are] coming through women on a much more solid foundation.”<sup>5</sup> Yunus contrasts this by calling the men there “peacocks.” He says that they would use money to buy “a watch, a good shirt, a radio.” If a client of the Grameen Bank has proven that she pays back her loans on time, she can get a loan to improve her own home. In many cases, this has meant that women hold the titles to their houses in a country where property-holding laws discriminate against women.

Although the main intention of the Grameen Bank is to provide a capital market to people on the lowest level of society, it does much more. In addition, the bank makes its customers save money to help them in emergency situations that might otherwise wipe them out. Also, the bank promotes consciousness about healthcare and education. The number of children in Grameen Bank families is significantly lower than the national average. The Grameen Bank does promote



birth control, but this is not the main reason for the phenomenon. When women are paying back a loan, they have less time to spend with children. Women who do not want to have more children can advocate the use of birth control. The man also generally realizes that it is not in the best interests of the family for the woman to be frequently pregnant. This new power, along with changes in the ownership of property, triggers an important qualitative shift in the position of women.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The above examples might be criticized for the same reason that many women do not have the time to take on the burden of being a part of the GRUMIN project or taking out a loan from the Grameen Bank. Moreover, the GRUMIN organization has its limits. Since its main purpose is to improve the situation of indigenous peoples, the central assertion is that freedom for them as a group will mean a return to values that are more egalitarian and harmonious with nature. Consequently, this perspective — given Professor Agarwal's point that traditional values are not necessarily an improvement on the present situation — might contain its own severe contradictions. Nonetheless, what I want to show with this example is that a group can bring international attention to itself through collective voice and good organization. The same principles at work with GRUMIN could be applied to a wide range of problems, including those under discussion in Professor Agarwal's essay.

As a policy action to improve the problems of environmental feminism, the Grameen Bank has its limits as well. There is nothing explicit in its work to suggest that it will improve the status of the environment, nor that of women. In practice, though, it has had a tremendous positive effect on women in Bangladesh. They now own property, are economic actors and providers for their families, and have improved their self-esteem and status. In addition, they are looking more strongly into the future with confidence. Among the families I met in Brazil, these other changes would lead to changes in their environmental practices. When the family is no longer condemned to struggle every day for enough food to sustain themselves, its situation will improve. When people begin to think in the long term, they may be more reluctant to cut down the rain forest, especially if they are

informed of some of the nearby areas that have become desolate because of the deforestation practices of the past twenty years.

The field of ecofeminism looks at the connections between the subordination of women and the domination of the environment. Professor Agarwal sees the linkages made between the two to be erroneous. The question of whether women do or do not have a closer link with the environment is not the pivotal issue. Rather, perhaps we should focus on whether the gender bias serves to damage the environment. In most cases, the answer is yes. Professor Agarwal advocates improving the situation of women by using increased bargaining within the home—a point well taken. However, with the contradictory forces of globalization upon us, new strategies are paramount. Here, the use of grassroots structures rather than large-scale government projects may prove to be the most conducive to the well-being of both women and the environment.

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### Notes

1. Karen J. Warren, "Environmental Ethics/IV: Ecofeminism," in *The Encyclopedia of Bioethics* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1997), 6.
2. Ann Olson and Joni Seager, *Women in the World: An International Atlas* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), sec. 25.
3. Ronaldo, a resident of the rain forest in Pará, Brazil, in a conversation with the author.
4. David Bornstein, *The Price of a Dream* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 20.
5. Source unknown.

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