

Ecofeminism Revisited: A Critical Appraisal of Theory and Practice

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Abstract

Ecofeminism emerged in the 1970s as a critical framework linking environmental degradation with patriarchal domination, asserting that the exploitation of nature and women stems from similar oppressive structures. This study critically appraises ecofeminist theory and practice through quantitative analysis of contemporary environmental movements, gender participation in environmental activism, and policy outcomes. The research employs a survey-based methodology examining 385 environmental activists across India to assess the practical application and relevance of ecofeminist principles. The hypothesis posits that ecofeminist frameworks significantly influence environmental activism and policy formulation in contemporary contexts. Results indicate that 67.3% of respondents acknowledge ecofeminist principles in their activism, with women comprising 58.2% of grassroots environmental movements. Statistical analysis reveals significant correlations between ecofeminist awareness and sustainable practices ($r=0.742$, $p<0.01$). Discussion highlights the evolution of ecofeminism from theoretical constructs to practical environmental justice movements, particularly in Global South contexts. The study concludes that while ecofeminism faces theoretical critiques regarding essentialism, its practical applications demonstrate substantial impact on environmental governance and community-based conservation, particularly in India where women-led movements like Chipko and anti-dam protests exemplify ecofeminist praxis.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Environmental Activism, Gender and Environment, Sustainable Development, Environmental Justice

1. Introduction

Ecofeminism represents a significant theoretical and practical intersection between environmental and feminist movements, emerging as a distinct philosophical framework in the 1970s through the works of scholars like Françoise d'Eaubonne who coined the term "écoféminisme" (Gaard, 2011). The movement fundamentally challenges the dualistic thinking that hierarchically positions culture over nature, man over woman, and rationality over emotion, arguing these binaries perpetuate both environmental destruction and gender oppression (Warren, 2015). Ecofeminism

asserts that patriarchal structures responsible for women's subordination are intrinsically linked to the domination and exploitation of nature, suggesting that liberation movements must address both concerns simultaneously (Merchant, 2020). The theoretical foundations of ecofeminism draw from diverse intellectual traditions including deep ecology, socialist feminism, and spiritual feminism, creating multiple strands within the movement itself (Plumwood, 2003). Critics have challenged ecofeminism for potentially reinforcing essentialist notions about women's inherent connection to nature, which could paradoxically strengthen patriarchal stereotypes (Birkeland, 2008). However, contemporary ecofeminists argue that their framework provides crucial insights into intersectional oppressions and offers practical pathways toward environmental justice, particularly evident in Global South contexts where women disproportionately bear the burdens of environmental degradation (Shiva, 2016).

In India, ecofeminist practice manifests through numerous grassroots movements where rural women have led environmental conservation efforts, from the Chipko movement's tree-hugging protests to contemporary anti-mining campaigns (Mies & Shiva, 2014). These movements demonstrate how women's traditional ecological knowledge and their position as primary resource managers in subsistence economies position them as crucial agents for sustainable development (Agarwal, 2010). The practical success of these movements raises important questions about ecofeminism's contemporary relevance and its evolution from theoretical discourse to actionable environmental politics. This research critically examines ecofeminism's theoretical propositions and practical applications in contemporary environmental movements, focusing on the Indian context where women-led environmental activism has achieved notable successes. Understanding ecofeminism's evolution, critiques, and practical manifestations becomes essential as global environmental crises intensify and the need for inclusive, justice-oriented environmental solutions grows increasingly urgent (Buckingham & Kulcur, 2019).

2. Literature Review

The ecofeminist literature encompasses diverse theoretical perspectives and empirical investigations examining the nature-gender nexus. Gaard (2011) provides comprehensive analysis of ecofeminism's evolution, identifying cultural ecofeminism, social ecofeminism, and socialist ecofeminism as distinct yet interconnected strands, each offering unique insights into environmental-gender relationships. Warren (2015) articulates the philosophical foundations of ecofeminist ethics, arguing that the logic of domination underlying both sexism and naturism requires dismantling hierarchical dualisms inherent in Western philosophical traditions. Merchant (2020) traces ecofeminism's historical development from the scientific revolution's mechanistic worldview to contemporary environmental justice movements, demonstrating how gendered metaphors of nature as passive feminine entity facilitated exploitative resource extraction. Shiva (2016) examines ecofeminism through postcolonial lens, arguing that development paradigms imposed on Global South nations perpetuate both environmental destruction and women's marginalization, while women's subsistence knowledge offers alternative sustainable pathways. Plumwood (2003) critically addresses

ecofeminism's theoretical challenges, particularly accusations of essentialism, arguing for critical ecofeminism that acknowledges socially constructed gender-nature connections without reifying biological determinism.

Empirical studies demonstrate ecofeminism's practical manifestations in environmental movements. Agarwal (2010) analyzes women's participation in Indian forest management, finding that women's inclusion in decision-making significantly improves conservation outcomes and community resource governance. Mies and Shiva (2014) document women-led subsistence movements globally, illustrating how ecofeminist principles inform grassroots resistance to capitalist development models. Birkeland (2008) examines ecofeminist contributions to sustainable design and planning, demonstrating practical applications in urban ecology and environmental policy formulation. Recent scholarship addresses intersectionality within ecofeminism. Buckingham and Kulcur (2019) argue that contemporary ecofeminism must engage with race, class, caste, and sexuality to address diverse women's environmental experiences and avoid homogenizing women's relationships with nature. Contemporary ecofeminist scholarship increasingly emphasizes material ecofeminism, focusing on concrete political-economic structures connecting capitalism, patriarchy, and environmental degradation rather than solely symbolic or spiritual connections (MacGregor, 2021).

3. Objectives

1. To critically analyze the theoretical foundations, evolution, and key strands of ecofeminism, including its philosophical contributions and major critiques such as essentialism and universalism.
2. To assess the level of awareness, acceptance, and application of ecofeminist principles among environmental activists in India and examine their relationship with sustainable environmental practices.
3. To examine gender participation and women's leadership in environmental movements, evaluating the influence of ecofeminist frameworks on organizational structures and decision-making.
4. To evaluate the effectiveness of ecofeminist-informed environmental movements in achieving conservation outcomes, influencing environmental policy, and advancing environmental justice through community-based resource management.

4. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design utilizing survey methodology to examine ecofeminist theory and practice among environmental activists in India. The research adopted a cross-sectional approach, collecting data during October-November 2023 to capture contemporary perspectives on ecofeminism's relevance and application. The quantitative framework enabled statistical analysis of relationships between ecofeminist awareness, gender participation, and environmental activism outcomes, providing empirical evidence for theoretical propositions. The sample comprised 385 environmental activists selected through stratified random sampling across five Indian states representing diverse ecological and socio-economic contexts: Maharashtra, Kerala, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, and West Bengal. Sample size determination followed Cochran's formula for finite populations, ensuring 95% confidence level

with 5% margin of error. Stratification criteria included gender, age groups, educational background, type of environmental organization, and years of activism experience. The sample included 224 women (58.2%) and 161 men (41.8%), reflecting gender distribution in grassroots environmental movements. Age distribution ranged from 18-65 years, with educational backgrounds from secondary education to doctoral degrees.

Data collection utilized a structured questionnaire comprising 45 items across five sections: demographic information, ecofeminist awareness and understanding, gender-environment perspectives, organizational practices, and environmental activism outcomes. The questionnaire incorporated Likert-scale items, multiple-choice questions, and ranking exercises. Ecofeminist awareness was measured through 12-item scale assessing knowledge of ecofeminist concepts, theorists, and principles. Gender-environment perspectives included 10 items examining beliefs about women's environmental roles and nature-gender connections. Organizational practices section contained 8 items evaluating gender inclusivity, decision-making structures, and ecofeminist principle integration. Environmental activism outcomes were assessed through 10 items measuring conservation achievements, policy influence, and community engagement. Survey administration occurred through both online platforms and in-person interviews, accommodating varying technological access among participants. Online surveys used Google Forms distributed through environmental organization networks and social media groups. In-person interviews were conducted with activists in rural areas with limited internet connectivity, ensuring representative sample inclusion. The questionnaire was available in English, Hindi, and three regional languages, validated through back-translation to ensure linguistic equivalence. Pilot testing with 40 activists refined question clarity and cultural appropriateness before full-scale deployment.

Data analysis employed SPSS 26.0 statistical software. Descriptive statistics calculated frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations for all variables. Inferential statistics included Pearson correlation coefficients examining relationships between ecofeminist awareness and environmental practices, chi-square tests assessing gender differences in environmental activism patterns, and multiple regression analysis identifying predictors of sustainable environmental outcomes. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. Reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha confirmed internal consistency of measurement scales, with all scales achieving alpha values above 0.75. Validity was established through expert review and convergent validity assessment correlating ecofeminist awareness scores with reported participation in women-centered environmental initiatives.

5. Results

The quantitative analysis yielded comprehensive data on ecofeminist awareness, gender participation patterns, organizational practices, and environmental activism outcomes among Indian environmental activists. The following tables present key findings with detailed statistical explanations.

Table 1: Ecofeminist Awareness and Understanding Among Environmental Activists (N=385)

Awareness Level	Frequency	Percentage	Mean Score (out of 12)	SD
High Awareness (10-12)	112	29.1%	10.8	0.82
Moderate Awareness (7-9)	147	38.2%	8.1	0.94
Low Awareness (4-6)	94	24.4%	5.3	0.76
Minimal Awareness (0-3)	32	8.3%	2.1	1.12

Table 1 demonstrates that 67.3% of environmental activists possess moderate to high ecofeminist awareness, indicating substantial theoretical knowledge penetration within activist communities. The mean awareness score of 7.4 (SD=2.8) suggests considerable variation in ecofeminist understanding across the sample. High awareness correlates significantly with educational attainment ($r=0.623$, $p<0.001$) and years of activism experience ($r=0.541$, $p<0.001$). Women activists demonstrated significantly higher awareness scores ($M=8.2$, $SD=2.6$) compared to men ($M=6.3$, $SD=2.9$), $t(383)=6.42$, $p<0.001$. This gender disparity suggests ecofeminist concepts resonate more strongly with women activists, possibly reflecting personal experiences of gendered environmental burdens. The 8.3% minimal awareness category primarily comprised newer activists and those in urban-focused environmental organizations, indicating ecofeminism's stronger presence in rural, community-based movements.

Table 2: Gender Participation in Environmental Activism by Organization Type (N=385)

Organization Type	Women (%)	Men (%)	Women in Leadership (%)	Total
Grassroots Community-Based	68.5	31.5	61.2	146
Forest Conservation	62.3	37.7	54.8	93
Anti-Dam/Water Rights	55.7	44.3	48.3	61
Urban Environmental NGOs	42.1	57.9	28.6	56
Climate Action Groups	46.2	53.8	33.3	29

Table 2 reveals significant variation in gender participation across environmental organization types, with grassroots community-based movements demonstrating highest women's participation at 68.5% and leadership representation at 61.2%. Chi-square analysis indicates statistically significant association between organization type and gender distribution ($\chi^2=47.32$, $df=4$, $p<0.001$). Women's predominance in grassroots movements supports ecofeminist arguments about women's central roles in community resource management and subsistence economies. Conversely, urban environmental NGOs and climate action groups show male predominance, possibly reflecting professionalization and technical discourse that historically marginalized women's participation. Women's leadership percentages consistently trail overall participation rates across all organization types, suggesting persistent glass ceiling effects even in women-majority movements. This leadership gap averages 14.3 percentage points, highlighting

ongoing challenges in translating numerical participation into decision-making authority, a key ecofeminist concern regarding authentic empowerment versus tokenistic inclusion.

Table 3: Correlation Between Ecofeminist Awareness and Sustainable Environmental Practices (N=385)

Variable	Ecofeminist Awareness	Sustainable Practices	Traditional Ecological Knowledge Use	Community Participation
Ecofeminist Awareness	1.000	0.742**	0.681**	0.594**
Sustainable Practices	0.742**	1.000	0.712**	0.658**
Traditional Ecological Knowledge	0.681**	0.712**	1.000	0.573**
Community Participation	0.594**	0.658**	0.573**	1.000

Note: **p<0.01

Table 3 presents correlation coefficients revealing strong positive relationships between ecofeminist awareness and various environmental practice indicators. The correlation between ecofeminist awareness and sustainable environmental practices ($r=0.742$, $p<0.01$) demonstrates that activists with greater ecofeminist understanding consistently implement more sustainable approaches in their work. Similarly, significant correlations exist between ecofeminist awareness and traditional ecological knowledge utilization ($r=0.681$, $p<0.01$) and community participation ($r=0.594$, $p<0.01$). These findings empirically validate ecofeminist theoretical claims that recognizing gender-environment connections enhances environmental effectiveness. Regression analysis indicates ecofeminist awareness explains 55.1% variance in sustainable practices ($R^2=0.551$, $F(1,383)=472.8$, $p<0.001$). The strong correlation between sustainable practices and traditional ecological knowledge use ($r=0.712$, $p<0.01$) supports ecofeminist emphasis on indigenous and women's knowledge systems as foundations for environmental sustainability, contrasting with technocentric approaches that devalue local expertise.

Table 4: Environmental Activism Outcomes by Ecofeminist Framework Integration (N=385)

Outcome Measure	High Integration (n=159)	Moderate Integration (n=138)	Low Integration (n=88)	F-value	p-value
Conservation Success Rate (%)	74.3±12.6	61.7±15.2	48.2±18.3	87.42	<0.001
Policy Influence Score (1-10)	7.8±1.4	6.2±1.8	4.7±2.1	96.73	<0.001



Community Engagement Level (1-10)	8.4±1.2	6.9±1.6	5.3±1.9	112.35	<0.001
Resource Management Effectiveness (%)	81.6±10.2	68.4±13.7	54.1±16.8	124.67	<0.001

Table 4 demonstrates significant differences in environmental activism outcomes based on ecofeminist framework integration levels, assessed through organizational practices and ideological orientations. One-way ANOVA reveals statistically significant differences across all outcome measures (all $p < 0.001$). Organizations with high ecofeminist integration achieve substantially higher conservation success rates (74.3%) compared to moderate (61.7%) and low integration groups (48.2%), indicating practical effectiveness of ecofeminist approaches. Post-hoc Tukey tests confirm all pairwise comparisons are significant at $p < 0.01$. Policy influence scores similarly increase with ecofeminist integration, suggesting movements explicitly addressing gender-environment connections achieve greater political impact. Community engagement levels show strongest differentiation ($F=112.35$, $p < 0.001$), with high integration organizations scoring 8.4 compared to 5.3 for low integration groups, validating ecofeminist emphasis on participatory, inclusive organizational structures. These empirical findings counter critiques dismissing ecofeminism as merely theoretical, demonstrating measurable practical advantages.

Table 5: Barriers to Ecofeminist Practice Implementation in Environmental Movements (N=385)

Barrier Category	Percentage Reporting	Severity Rating (1-5)	Gender Difference (M-F)
Patriarchal Organizational Structures	71.4%	4.2±0.9	0.7**
Limited Awareness/Education	68.3%	4.0±0.8	0.3
Economic Constraints	62.1%	3.8±1.1	-0.2
Essentialism Concerns	47.5%	3.2±1.3	-0.5*
Intersectionality Challenges	54.7%	3.6±1.0	0.1
Institutional Resistance	59.2%	3.9±1.2	0.4*

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Table 5 identifies significant barriers hindering ecofeminist practice implementation, with patriarchal organizational structures emerging as most frequently reported (71.4%) and highest severity-rated barrier ($M=4.2$, $SD=0.9$). Women activists rate patriarchal structures significantly more severe than men (mean difference=0.7, $p < 0.01$), reflecting differential experiences of organizational sexism. Limited awareness and education ranks second at 68.3%, indicating need for enhanced ecofeminist pedagogy within environmental movements despite demonstrated awareness levels in Table 1, suggesting gap between conceptual knowledge and practical application capacity. Economic constraints affect 62.1% of respondents, reflecting resource limitations particularly acute in grassroots movements. Notably,

essentialism concerns affect 47.5% but with moderate severity ($M=3.2$), suggesting theoretical critiques of ecofeminism have limited practical impact compared to structural barriers. Intersectionality challenges at 54.7% highlight contemporary ecofeminism's struggle to address diverse women's experiences across caste, class, and religious differences, particularly relevant in Indian context. These findings emphasize implementing ecofeminist principles requires addressing multiple structural, educational, and resource barriers beyond theoretical agreement.

6. Discussion

The quantitative findings substantiate ecofeminism's theoretical propositions while illuminating practical complexities in contemporary environmental movements. The substantial ecofeminist awareness among Indian environmental activists (67.3% with moderate to high awareness) demonstrates successful knowledge dissemination beyond academic circles into grassroots practice, validating scholars who argue ecofeminism provides accessible frameworks for understanding environmental-gender connections (Gaard, 2011). However, the 32.7% with low to minimal awareness indicates uneven penetration, particularly among urban-focused organizations, suggesting ecofeminism's stronger resonance in rural, community-based contexts where women's subsistence roles make gender-environment connections more immediately visible. Gender participation patterns reveal nuanced relationships between ecofeminist theory and organizational practice. Women's predominance in grassroots community-based movements (68.5%) and forest conservation (62.3%) empirically validates Shiva's (2016) arguments about women's centrality to subsistence economies and community resource management. Yet women's underrepresentation in urban NGOs (42.1%) and climate action groups (46.2%) suggests class and educational dimensions mediate gender-environment relationships, supporting Agarwal's (2010) critiques of monolithic women-nature categories. The persistent leadership gap averaging 14.3 percentage points across organization types demonstrates that numerical participation doesn't automatically translate into decision-making authority, echoing ecofeminist concerns about authentic empowerment versus tokenistic inclusion.

The strong correlation between ecofeminist awareness and sustainable practices ($r=0.742$, $p<0.01$) provides compelling empirical evidence for ecofeminism's practical utility, countering critiques dismissing it as merely theoretical. This finding aligns with Merchant's (2020) historical analysis showing mechanistic worldviews facilitate exploitation while holistic, relational frameworks promote sustainability. The correlation between ecofeminist awareness and traditional ecological knowledge use ($r=0.681$, $p<0.01$) supports ecofeminist arguments privileging indigenous and women's knowledge systems over technocentric approaches, though intersectionality critiques remind us not all women possess equal traditional knowledge access (Buckingham & Kulcur, 2019). Environmental activism outcomes demonstrate measurable advantages of ecofeminist framework integration, with high integration organizations achieving 74.3% conservation success compared to 48.2% for low integration groups. These findings validate Warren's (2015) philosophical arguments that dismantling domination logic improves environmental outcomes. Particularly striking is community engagement differentiation (8.4 versus 5.3), supporting ecofeminist

emphasis on participatory, inclusive structures versus hierarchical organization models. However, causation cannot be definitively established; organizations may integrate ecofeminist frameworks because they already possess strong community connections rather than ecofeminism creating those connections.

Barrier analysis reveals patriarchal organizational structures as primary implementation obstacle, rated more severely by women activists, demonstrating how gendered power dynamics resist ecofeminist transformation even within ostensibly progressive environmental movements. This finding resonates with Plumwood's (2003) arguments about deeply embedded dualistic thinking requiring sustained critical interrogation. The moderate impact of essentialism concerns (47.5% reporting, severity 3.2) suggests theoretical academic debates have limited practical implications for activists, though this may reflect insufficient engagement with critiques rather than their invalidity. Intersectionality challenges at 54.7% highlight contemporary ecofeminism's struggle addressing caste, class, and religious diversity, particularly urgent in Indian context where Dalit and Adivasi women's environmental experiences differ markedly from upper-caste women's experiences. The Indian context provides particularly fertile ground for ecofeminist practice given historical women-led movements like Chipko, contemporary anti-mining protests, and traditional systems recognizing women's resource management roles, as documented by Mies and Shiva (2014). However, romanticizing these movements risks overlooking how caste hierarchies, religious communalism, and economic liberalization complicate simple gender-environment narratives. Contemporary Indian ecofeminism must grapple with how Hindu nationalism instrumentalizes nature-women connections for exclusionary politics while neoliberal development displaces both women and ecosystems.

These findings suggest ecofeminism's evolution from 1970s theoretical emergence to contemporary practice demonstrates both continuity and transformation. Core insights about interconnected oppressions remain valid and demonstrably effective, while contemporary ecofeminism must address intersectionality more robustly and avoid essentialist pitfalls. Material ecofeminist approaches focusing on concrete political-economic structures connecting capitalism, patriarchy, and environmental degradation offer promising directions, as argued by MacGregor (2021). Future research should examine how ecofeminist frameworks address climate change, technological development, and global environmental governance while maintaining commitment to gender justice and environmental sustainability.

7. Conclusion

This critical appraisal of ecofeminism through quantitative analysis of contemporary Indian environmental movements demonstrates both theoretical validity and practical effectiveness of ecofeminist frameworks while acknowledging ongoing challenges and necessary evolution. The research findings validate core ecofeminist propositions linking environmental degradation with patriarchal domination structures, evidenced through strong correlations between ecofeminist awareness and sustainable practices, measurably superior outcomes for movements integrating ecofeminist principles, and women's predominant participation in grassroots environmental activism particularly in community-based resource management contexts. However, the study equally illuminates ecofeminism's limitations

and implementation barriers, including persistent leadership gaps despite women's numerical participation, uneven awareness across urban-rural and professionalized-grassroots divides, and intersectionality challenges requiring more robust engagement with caste, class, and religious diversity. The moderate impact of essentialism concerns among practitioners suggests theoretical critiques have limited practical resonance, though this may reflect insufficient critical engagement rather than critique invalidity. Patriarchal organizational structures emerge as primary barriers to ecofeminist practice implementation, demonstrating how deeply embedded dualistic thinking resists transformation even within progressive movements.

Contemporary ecofeminism must evolve beyond potential essentialist tendencies toward intersectional material ecofeminism addressing concrete political-economic structures while avoiding romanticized nature-women connections that risk reinforcing stereotypes. The Indian context demonstrates ecofeminism's practical power through historical and contemporary women-led movements achieving conservation success and policy influence, while simultaneously revealing how nationalism, communalism, and neoliberalism complicate gender-environment relationships. Future ecofeminist theory and practice must balance acknowledging women's differentiated environmental experiences and knowledge with avoiding homogenizing diverse women across social hierarchies, maintaining commitment to environmental justice and gender equality simultaneously. This research contributes empirical evidence supporting ecofeminism's continued relevance for addressing interconnected environmental and social crises while identifying crucial areas requiring theoretical refinement and practical strengthening for ecofeminism to fulfill its transformative potential.

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