WOMEN'S SECURITY NEEDS VERSUS FEMINIST AGENDA? IMPLICATIONS OF THE SECURITY-ENVIRONMENT-GENDER NEXUS

Heidi Hudson[1]

1.   INTRODUCTION

The beginning of the 1990s witnessed a dramatic shift in consciousness away from concerns regarding military security. The placement of the environment on the agenda of high politics is intrinsically linked to the shift in consciousness as to how security, peace, conflict, war and politics are viewed in the post-Cold War era. Dissatisfaction with narrow military concerns was partly stimulated by the rise of economic and environmental international concerns and agendas during the 1970s and 1980s. In addition, it was also argued that a military definition of security confined the debate to the realms of the developed world and negated the consequences for the majority of the world's population. In the developed world old threats have largely been replaced by new ones, but in the developing world new threats are added to existing military threats. Thus, a concern with new meanings of security has become central to the agenda of International Relations.

This contribution briefly traces the changes in the contemporary security discourse and highlights some of the tensions apparent in the environmental sector of security. It is argued that the current human security framework holds up a false holism. An increased sensitivity to the so-called "marginalised" - without openly acknowledging women's specific gendered security needs - defeats all claims to total inclusivity. Whilst recognising that gender is not the only factor leading to a critical questioning of mainstream security thinking,[2] the principle is put forward that a gender perspective not only enhances our understanding of global developments by analysing and confronting the partiality of masculinist accounts, but also offers alternative constructions that could lead to new and creative solutions to our environmental security problems.

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[1]   Department of Political Science, University of the Orange Free State.
[2]   See the contribution of critical security studies in this regard.

Ecofeminism as a variant of feminism has a relatively established, though infamous, relationship with the environment.[3] But still the consistent inclusion of gender on the environmental security agenda remains lacking and issues are contested mostly at the conceptual level. It is my contention that gender as a variable or tool of analysis would be far more effective if both the environmental security and ecofeminist discourses adopted a contextual approach. In practical terms it means addressing the security problems that arise from the intersection between environmental concerns and women's security needs in a particular setting. In this article the scene is Africa and the units of analysis are women of Africa.

2.   SECURITY: A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

Barry Buzan[4] and Ken Booth[5] provide useful theoretical frameworks for the analysis of a multidimensional and multilevel security agenda. Such multiple dimensions and levels are aimed at signifying "where" things happen, thus offering a framework within which one can theorise. Booth recommends a broadening of the security concept both horizontally and vertically. On the horizontal axis security is seen as dependent on political democracy and a culture of human rights, social and economic development, environmental sustainability, as well as military stability.[6] In this regard Buzan identifies five "sectors" of security, namely political, societal, economic, environmental and military, which serve as analytical tools or "ordering priorities ... woven together in a strong web of linkages"[7] or relationships. For instance, "the military sector is about the relationships of forceful coercion; the political sector is about relationships of authority; the economic sector is about relationships of trade, production and finance; and the societal sector is about relationships of collective identity".[8] The environmental sector in particular refers to the relationships between human activity and the planetary biosphere. The vertical hierarchy of analytical levels (from individual, national, regional to international) enables us to see how the referent objects of security[9] have evolved to

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[3]   In this contribution the author offers both a critique of ecofeminism and a defence of its value in terms of the interface between the environmental and the human security discourses.

[4]   See B Buzan, People, states and fear. An agenda for international security studies in the post-Cold War Era (New York, 1991); B Buzan, O Waever and J de Wilde, Security. A new framework for analysis (London, 1998).

[5]   H Solomon and J Cilliers, "People, poverty and peace", in H Solomon and J Cilliers (eds), People, poverty and peace: Human security in Southern Africa, ISS Monograph Series 4 (Halfway House, May 1996), p. 6.

[6]   Solomon and Cilliers, p. 6.

[7]   Buzan, p. 20.

[8]   Buzan, Waever and De Wilde, p. 7.

[9]   Levels of analysis refer to spatial locations from macro to micro, where both sources of explanation and outcomes can be located. Referent objects of security are things that are seen to be existentially threatened and that have a legitimate claim to survival. In this regard see Buzan, p. 187; Buzan, Waever and De Wilde, pp. 1-8, 36.

include non-state actors and people as the primary referents of security. State or national security is therefore redefined to encompass human security.

The **Bonn Declaration** (1991) defines human security as "the absence of threat to human life, lifestyle and culture through the fulfilment of basic needs".[10] The central feature of the new security agenda is a revived interest in normative matters. It reflects an increasing concern for the human condition and therefore focuses on addressing the root causes of human insecurity rather than its consequences and on providing rather than maintaining security. The term "human security" is preferred, because it is more overtly linked to the normative notion of incorporating care into the security discourse. The term is also more appropriate for developing world conditions where non-military issues are more directly linked to an understanding of security. Particularly in the developing world, the state has often been the root cause of insecurity among its people, for instance through non-intervention in domestic violence, and its definition of rape and patriarchal law. It is therefore imperative that the broadening of the security concept should challenge the status quo.[11] In this context human security becomes synonymous with a condition of "positive" peace, which is not only the absence of war but also the existence of social justice.

Such an expanded security agenda is often criticised on two grounds. Firstly, the concept of human security is regarded as being essentially utopian due to its inclusive and holistic nature and purpose. As a result its intellectual coherence is questioned. Secondly, opponents of this concept have pointed out that it could lead to the "securitisation"[12] of areas of interaction traditionally considered to be outside the scope of military and political security, such as the environment. In response to this it is argued that, to include a non-military issue on the security agenda not only raises its political profile, but also works toward a demilitarisation of security thinking by creating an interdimensional awareness. It is furthermore maintained that an expanded notion of security does not have to be "unmanageable". The multilayered and multidimensional framework set out above provides adequate structure, yet is sufficiently dynamic to allow for the prioritisation of issues. In a

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10   See H Solomon, "From marginalised to dominant discourse: Reflections on the evolution of new security thinking", in H Solomon and M van Aardt (eds), **'Caring' security in Africa: Theoretical and practical considerations of new security thinking,** ISS Monograph Series 20 (Halfway House, February 1998), p. 7.

11   K Booth and P Vale, "Security in Southern Africa: After Apartheid, beyond realism", **International Affairs,** Vol. 71, No. 2, April 1995, p. 293.

12   Securitisation is a more extreme version of politicisation. Any public issue can be located on the spectrum ranging from non-politicised (state has no role to play) through politicised (requiring government action) to securitised (as dealing with an existential threat, thus requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the usual parameters of political procedure). See Buzan, Waever and De Wilde, pp. 23-4.

world where complex interdependence characterises much of our global interaction only those élites with vested political interests will propagate simplistic, one-dimensional solutions to complex, holistic problems.

3.   ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY?

The theoretical and operational linkages between security and changes in the environment appear to be quite obvious, because environmental degradation is in itself a severe threat to human security and all life on earth and can be both cause and effect of violent conflict.[13] However, environmental security as a concept raises many methodological and theoretical problems. A number of ambiguous areas, explaining why there is no consensus on a definition of environmental security, are briefly highlighted.

In the first instance, the environmental sector is made complicated by the great variety of issues on its agenda which necessitates "issue ranking" or prioritisation. Disruption of ecosystems and energy problems represent the most purely environmental issues, whereas population, food, and economic problems coupled with civil strife are at the bottom of the agenda. Secondly, the overlapping yet vastly differing agenda of the scientific and the political community in respect of the environment further complicate this sector of security. The scientific agenda is shaped by the natural sciences and non-governmental activity while the political agenda is essentially governmental and intergovernmental in nature. Thirdly, the range of possible referent objects is very large, ranging from the survival of individual species to more general issues such as the maintenance of the planetary climate and biosphere.[14] A fourth complicating factor relates to the ideological tension between the "Green" perspective which views the environment, nature itself, as the primary referent of security and the neo-liberal school of thought which regards the preservation of existing levels of civilisation (human enterprise) as the primary concern.[15] In the final instance, the assumption that all environmental problems are universal or global per se is questioned. The aim is not to argue that environmental problems are not integrated, but rather to highlight the fact that causes, effects and appropriate action are often much more localised in nature. For instance, pollution-related problems require first and foremost joint action by the highly industrialised states. Some areas may be worse affected than

[13]   N Graeger, "Environmental security?", **Journal of Peace Research**, Vol. 33, No. 1, 1996, pp. 109-11.

[14]   Buzan, Waever and De Wilde, pp. 23, 71-6.

[15]   Buzan (pp. 19-20) defines environmental security as "concerning the maintenance of the local and the planetary biosphere as the essential support system on which all other human enterprises depend". This clearly implies that the primary concern is with human enterprise and not about threats to nature as such. In this regard see Buzan, Waever and De Wilde, pp. 76, 84.

others, e.g. while global warming is a global problem in a moral sense, the effects of the rise in the sea-level are more immediate for some vulnerable coastal areas. Given the mixed success of international environmental regimes, effective regional management is necessary and far more possible. Co-operation in combating maritime pollution suggests that it is a global problem. However, cleaning up the Baltic Sea is not conditional on cleaning up the Mediterranean. Both require similar knowledge and procedures but are separate in that they belong to different regional security complexes, each with its own dynamics and contextualised threats.[16]

The conceptual parameters of the environmental security debate are therefore quite clearly disputed. To avoid perpetuating this state of affairs scholars[17] currently prefer to focus more on the empirical correlation between environmental factors and the most traditional indicators of insecurity: violent conflict and the outbreak of war. Along similar lines Graeger[18] argues that one should rather attempt to define environmental *in*security through analysis of relevant empirical case studies. Insecurity refers to a situation where these threats are likely to lead to (violent) conflict. The empirical evidence generated by means of case studies facilitates easier communication between the academic and political community at large.

4.   (ECO)FEMINIST CONTRIBUTIONS: FROM ESSENTIALISM TO ALTERNATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

Harmonising theoretical and practical concerns undoubtedly poses the biggest challenge to scholars of new security thinking. One way of achieving this is to consider the contribution feminism (and ecofeminism) can make to enhance human security and environmental discourse. This is motivated by the fact that, despite the growing acceptance of a more ambitious security agenda, the formal and consistent inclusion of gender relations on the security agenda remains lacking. All experiences are subsumed under a universal rubric of "human" that is in fact an expression of the masculine experience.[19] More often than not gender is mentioned only as a byproduct of the inclusion of economic and developmental issues, for example when referring to the plight of African women in agriculture. In the light of such ad hoc references to women's "place" in the global order, the need for a truly inclusive re-examination of security becomes imperative.

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16   Buzan, Waever and De Wilde, pp. 84-91.
17   Refer to the special issue on environmental conflict of the **Journal of Peace Research**, Vol. 35, No. 3, 1998, p. 275 in particular.
18   Graeger, pp. 113-5.
19   I Bakker, "Identity, interests and ideology: the gendered terrain of global restructuring", in S Gill (ed.), **Globalization, democratization and multilateralism** (New York, 1997), p. 130.

The feminist contribution to new security thinking embodies principles of critique, care and comprehensive and co-operative security, and postulates a specific interaction between theory and practice and between means and ends.[20] Firstly, feminist thinking on security offers a critique of monogendered theories and practices of world politics, and exposes the way in which one's ability to think comprehensively about national security policy and global security issues is inhibited by such theorising and praxis. Secondly, a feminist reconceptualisation of security promotes comprehensive all-inclusive security through its focus on the sources of insecurity. Feminism extends the general arguments about the nature of society to the realm of security and reminds us that comprehensive security can only be achieved if the relations of domination in all walks of life are eliminated. Thirdly, the feminist notion of security redefines common or co-operative security by arguing for a re-evaluation of the notion of power - not as the ability to make someone do something he/she would not otherwise do, but as the ability to act interdependently. In this sense empathy or care is given preference over autonomy, self-help and competition. Fourthly, the feminist contribution is the end product of a dialectical relationship between theory and practice, emerging from the intersection of women's practice in the peace movements (a political project) and the analysis of gender in feminist studies (an intellectual enterprise). Finally, feminist security thinking in conjunction with other critical theorists reconstructs the complex interconnectedness of the condition of peace, security, threats and expectations by highlighting the fact that just as the personal cannot be separated from the political, so can means and ends not be separated. In fact, processes and methods often take precedence over outcomes. Posing the question of "how" rather than "why" hence opens up room for a multitude of explanations.

The feminist project is, however, not without its shortcomings. One of the main reasons for the difficulty in putting women and gender on the human and environmental security agenda, particularly in the developing world, may be related to a preoccupation with patriarchy and essentialising tendencies within the radical feminist paradigm, as embodied by the ecofeminist movement.

Ecofeminism joins together two distinct but related movements, namely environmentalism and feminism. Feminists explore why women are treated as inferior to men, while environmentalists are interested in why nature is treated as inferior to culture or science.[21] Somma and Tolleson-Rinehart define ecofeminism

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[20]   H Hudson discusses the feminist contribution at length in "A feminist reading of security in Africa", in H Solomon and M van Aardt (eds), **'Caring' security in Africa: Theoretical and practical considerations of new security thinking**, ISS Monograph Series 20 (Halfway House, February 1998), pp. 22-98.

[21]   M Mellor, "Myths and realities: A reply to Cecile Jackson", **New Left Review**, No. 217, May/June 1996, p. 137; http://www.geocities.com/Wellesley/8385/whatisecofeminism.html

as "a set of theories variously claiming that, because of biological determinism, reproductive and maternal roles, the oppression of patriarchy and women's more holistic spiritual connection to nature, or the alternative perspective that feminism can provide, women are more concerned about [closer to] the environment than are men".[22] Throughout the centuries gendered metaphors such as "Mother Earth" and "rape of nature" have been fundamental in shaping attitudes towards nature, women and non-Western peoples and have also served to emphasise the perceived shared inferiority of women and nature. Carolyn Merchant in her work **The death of nature** (1989) also traces the attitude of domination over women and nature back to the development of capitalist society and the rise of science and the principle of scientific rationality.[23] As a consequence of the Enlightenment, it is argued that man has sought to tame and impose order upon nature, very much in the same way as man or the state has maintained gender inequality and domination through patriarchy.

In light of the above, ecofeminists assert that there exists a clear conceptual link between the inattention to environmental problems (the rights of nature) and the silence about women's rights in general and more specifically, the gender-differentiated effects of ecological insecurity on women as subsistence providers. In the developing world context, the relationships between human beings and nature and between women and nature are much more intimate, in the same way as the effects of environmental degradation on women in the developing world are more immediately and materially felt than in the developed world.

The connection, however, is not biological but rather historical, symbolic and practical. Green[24] maintains that, since the philosophical outlook which has justified man's domination of nature is the very same as the one that has justified man's domination of women and the subsequent division of labour, the linkage represents - at most - a symbolic connection over time. A more plausible explanation would be to show that there exists a practical link between the intersection of the interests of feminists and ecologists. One such area relates to the correlation between women's right to choose whether to have children or not and the environmental problems caused by overpopulation. The gendered division of labour, which places women in the subsistence sector and men in the formal economy, forces women "to reproduce in order to eat".[25]

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22   M Somma and S Tolleson-Rinehart, "Tracking the elusive green women: Sex, environmentalism, and feminism in the United States and Europe", **Political Research Quarterly**, Vol. 50, No. 1, 1997, p. 153.

23   K Green, "Freud, Wollstonecraft, and Ecofeminism: A defense of liberal feminism", **Environmental Ethics**, Vol. 16, No. 2, 1994, p. 122.

24   Green, pp. 123-4, 132-3.

25   Green, p. 133.

The biological connection between nature and indigenous women in particular[26] is criticised as essentialist, for it not only negates the differences between, but also romanticises women from marginalised societies. Such a view presumes an orderly world and overlooks the fact that women, just like nature, have many irregularities, particularly in respect of power. The rejection of modernity in favour of subsistence societies suggests that communal life is harmonious, and that patriarchy is a purely Western and/or static phenomenon. Ecofeminism elevates local, indigenous and women's knowledge and in so doing keeps women in their "natural" place, as subsistence producers in the developing world and as housewives in industrialised countries.[27] The call of many ecofeminists to pursue holism by including gender in their analysis, and to follow a "natural holism" or "whole earth" approach should therefore rather be replaced by the term "fractious (multilevel) holism", thus avoiding the creation of a false impression of harmony or stability.

Ecofeminism furthermore overstates women's capacity for solidarity by presenting environmental struggles in the South as women's or rather feminist struggles. Many women working on ecological issues do not necessarily have an explicit gender perspective. The Green Belt afforestation movement, launched in 1977 by the National Council of Women in Kenya, is a case in point where women through high-profile activism succeeded in mobilising men and women around ecological issues.[28] Although desirable in terms of social change, women's interests need not always coincide with gender interests. In Africa in particular, where women's organisations are relatively strong and feminist movements relatively weak, the scope of insecurity of women and the continent as a whole necessitates a more flexible interaction between strategic gender interests and practical women's needs.[29] This point also relates to the dubious practical relevance of abstract ecofeminist writing for women and communities in the South. Ecofeminist proposals for social justice often range from delinking from the global economy

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[26]   "Ecofeminism" by Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva is a particularly appropriate example of this kind of essentialist analysis.

[27]   M Molyneux and DL Steinberg, "Mies and Shiva's 'ecofeminism': a new testament?", **Feminist Review**, No. 49, Spring 1995, pp. 91-5, 97; Mellor, pp. 132-7.

[28]   Ecofeminists defend themselves against this charge by saying that one does not have to be a feminist to display ecofeminist traits. Elements of feminism and gender consciousness are present among women who do not explicitly identify with the feminist project. See Somma and Tolleson-Rinehart, p. 155.

[29]   Strategic gender needs are essentially feminist as they challenge women's subordinate position in society. In contrast, practical gender (or rather women's) needs are more tactical and usually non-feminist in nature because they are formulated from women's concrete experiences, that is, the effects of women's engendered status. See CON Moser, "Gender planning in the Third World: Meeting practical and strategic needs", in R Grant and K Newland (eds), **Gender and International Relations** (Bloomington, 1991), pp. 90-1.

and returning to a subsistence culture to practising participatory democracy.[30] Such suggestions do not really offer viable alternatives to people and states faced with the paradoxical situation of being simultaneously marginalised from the global economic system and being encouraged to integrate into the global political economy as their only means of salvation.

Despite the criticism the feminist discourse on environmental security does offer an enriching and alternative perspective of the relationship between man, woman and nature. The general contribution of feminism to the human security discourse lies in the fact that it exposes the very exclusive way in which the term "human" is used. In a similar way ecofeminism seeks to expose the whole ecostructure of oppression,[31] that is, of human and non-human groupings. By exploring the ecological consequences of, for instance, military security policy, ecofeminism drives home the fact that nature also has rights and that any attempt at holistic thinking can only work if plans are based on constructive and equal partnerships and practical experience. While one cannot equate the environmental struggle with women's struggles, one has to acknowledge that women's involvement has contributed to their increased political involvement and to establishing an ecofeminist agenda in such struggles.[32] Ecofeminism cannot be blamed for fabricating all essentialist assumptions - many of which are inherently present in the logic of patriarchal thought. One should, therefore, consider the mediating role that ecofeminism (despite its shortcomings and ideological rhetoric) can play between conventional (human-centred) and more radical (ecocentric) paradigms regarding environmental security.

5.   SYNTHESIS OF SECURITY, ENVIRONMENT AND GENDER: A CONTEXTUAL APPROACH

So far in this article it has been argued that both the environmental security and ecofeminist discourses are complex, ideologically loaded and contested. The radical fervour of the feminist and environmentalist positions on the one hand and the more mainstream approach of the environmental management perspective on the other hand represent two extremes on the continuum of the environmental security debate. However, despite the differences these paradigms share a tendency to view issues within a universalist framework. The environmental security

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[30]   S Hallock Johnson, "An ecofeminist critique of the international economic structure", in MK Meyer and E Prügl (eds), **Gender politics in global governance** (New York, 1999), pp. 227-9; F d'Eaubonne, "What could an eco-feminist society be?", http://www.geocities.com/Wellesley/8385/ecofemsociety2.htm, pp.3-4.

[31]   G Gaard, "Women, animals, and ecofeminist critique", **Environmental Ethics,** Vol. 18, No. 4, 1996, p. 441.

[32]   Mellor, p. 135.

framework tends to view environmental problems as essentially global in character, and thereby subsuming the environmental security needs of particular groups such as women under the rubric of the universal male axiom. Ecofeminists tend to view women as all having "a privileged understanding of the environment and an innate ability to care for it".[33] This shared tendency explains why these debates are conducted mainly at the conceptual level rather than offering concrete suggestions for addressing the security problems that arise from the intersection between environmental concerns and women's interests and security needs. Both discourses therefore display a lack of understanding of the contextual nature of security and its differential impact on different groups, particularly in the developing world.

Instead of dwelling on what "ought to be", a more concrete, pragmatic and relevant approach to using gender as a tool of analysis would involve viewing women's general security needs and women's relationship to nature specifically as contingent upon the institutional context. Such institutional contexts include, amongst others, natural resources, technology, the means of subsistence and gender specification.[34] Three examples from underdeveloped regions of the world illustrate the importance of a contextualised approach to analysis. The well-known Chipko (tree-hugging) movement in India started in the Himalayas in 1973 when workers of a local co-operative called for Chipko rallies to protest against the government policy of commercial logging. Villagers, the majority of whom were female, were successful in preventing the cutting of 300 trees. What is known today as an environmental movement started off with a very clear material motivation – commercial logging, deforestation, soil erosion and flooding directly threatened local women's livelihood and agricultural productivity. These women's gender roles and subsistence activities were directly tied to their roles as collectors of food, firewood and other forest products.[35] A similar sexual division of labour as well as the need to protect their means of subsistence motivated the women of the Green Belt movement in Kenya to initiate a series of reforestation campaigns. In contrast to Africa or Asia, gender specification and tradition do not afford women a central role in agriculture in Latin America. Women have become involved in urban environmental initiatives, targeting problems such as solid waste management. In

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[33]   E Zein-Elabdin, "Development, gender, and the environment: Theoretical or contextual link? Toward an institutional analysis of gender", Journal of Economic Issues, Vol. 30, No. 4, 1996, p. 929.

[34]   Gender specification denotes the social designation of individuals to particular gender roles, according to the structures of patriarchal power which determine the position of men and women in all walks of life. Gender specification is particularly evident in the economic system where the division of labour and ensuing access to property and wealth have a direct bearing on gender-different security needs. See Zein-Elabdin, pp. 930 and 939.

[35]   Jackson also points out that women in this movement were part of a broader peasant protest - defending economic interests rather than trees as such. Refer to C New, "Man bad, woman good? Essentialisms and ecofeminisms", New Left Review, No. 216, March/April 1996, pp. 83-4.

Mexico, for example, women introduced and have successfully operated a waste management and recycling system in the town of Mérida since 1978. Institutional context and not a universal closeness to nature is the determining factor for women's involvement in environmental struggle in the three cases mentioned.[36]

In this regard "theorising" only has value in so far as it is used in conjunction with a practical approach that views women's relationship to the environment in the context of their multiple but interdependent roles as agents of ecological destruction, victims of ecological degradation, and managers of limited natural resources.

5.1   Women's destructive relationship to the environment

Attempts by the United Nations Women in Development (WID) initiative to mainstream women's issues through increased participation in decision-making, and better analysis and dissemination of research results did not succeed in integrating women into the development process. This "add women and stir" approach imports women into preconceived projects which are often insensitive to local traditions and conditions.[37] In the process rural communities are impoverished and rural women are burdened with the responsibility of taking care of the environment when men migrate to the cities. African women's insecure position in the development process therefore impacts upon the ecological security of the family and the community as a whole.[38]

The WID position particularly favours the view of women as agents of environmental destruction. Poverty, in this view, is the primary cause forcing African women in their traditional role as collectors of firewood, water and food to exploit natural resources. Farming steep hillsides and thereby aggravating soil erosion and flooding during heavy rains become, in this context, a matter of economic necessity. Energy in rural Africa is mainly biomass (wood for fuel, crop residues and manure), which accounts for 90 per cent of fuel consumed in sub-Saharan Africa. Exploitation of the environment in this way becomes a rational decision by the poor in the face of limited access to modern energy sources. The gathering of wood, for instance, is often named as a cause of deforestation. In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, about 73 000 women and children make a living by collecting firewood from protected forests and selling it in the city. Since women are overly represented among the poor, World Bank studies of forest destruction

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[36]   Zein-Elabdin, pp. 935-7.
[37]   Zein-Elabdin, pp. 931-2.
[38]   G Kirk, "Women resist ecological destruction", in G Ashworth (ed.), A diplomacy of the oppressed: New directions in international feminism (London, 1995), p. 71.

through firewood gathering have overstated women's complicity in this kind of ecological destruction. Women, in fact, collect mostly dead wood. It is ironic that a woman's social worth is measured in terms of how she exploits nature, how "productive" she is in discovering arable land and firewood. By contrast, the male-dominated charcoal industry that provides urban areas with fuel contributes far more to deforestation.[39] Caroline New[40] captures the essence of this paradox: "Women may or may not be nurturing, but even where they are, environmental destruction may result from their care."

On a more commercial level women enter the labour market as plantation or forest industry workers, thereby contributing towards deforestation. Collecting, processing and selling forest products are often the only ways in which rural women can obtain a cash income. In Egypt's Fayoum province 48 per cent of women work in the forest industries. In Northeast Tanzania, in at least 50 per cent of the households surveyed, one member of each household was active in the forest industry.[41]

5.2 Women as victims of ecological degradation: fiction or fact?

There exists an almost symbiotic relationship between being an agent and being a victim of ecological insecurity. Women, often at their own hands, suffer most as a result of ecological devastation. Collecting firewood and carrying water are strenuous and time-consuming tasks. In some parts of Africa women spend eight hours per day collecting water. Not only are the water-collection points situated far away, but the pumps are often inaccessible and difficult to operate and repair. Moreover, the quality of the water is frequently very poor, which poses a general health risk. Girls start at a very young age to carry water. This unremitting burden can distort their pelvis, making the recurrent cycles of pregnancy and childbirth more dangerous.[42]

A one-sided presentation of women's attitudes toward the environment as largely benign absolves women of all responsibility for environmental degradation and borders on the essentialist reasoning so typical of some ecofeminists. Women's knowledge of the local environment must be protected against the hostile aspects of the global capitalist economy, but it would be wrong to present it as superior to

39   Zein-Elabdin, p. 933.
40   New, p. 82.
41   A Rodda, Women and the environment (London, 1991), p. 47; S Calvert and P Calvert, Politics and society in the Third World: An introduction (London, 1996), p. 239; Zein-Elabdin, p. 933.
42   Rodda, pp. 52-3.

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men's knowledge and scientific knowledge. Such tendencies to polarise can only be counterproductive.[43]

5.3 Beyond destructiveness and powerlessness: women as resource managers and conservationists

Since women in Africa are often seen as part of the environmental problem, their role as conservationists and managers of natural resources is often overlooked. As the primary producers of agricultural products, as those who control the storage and the use of water in large parts of Africa, women are ideally placed to play a leading role in the process of sustainable development. Most African women in rural communities experience and interact with the natural environment on a daily basis. These women have an expert knowledge of local water conditions and indigenous plants for medicinal use and of seasonal conditions for growing crops.[44] Such skills are passed on from generation to generation. Their holistic understanding of the intimate relationship between environmental, socio-cultural and economic issues such as population growth is demonstrated in the West African Sahel where women, through their involvement in the control of desertification, played a pivotal role in the change of male attitudes towards large families.[45]

In Africa, in particular, behaviour towards the environment is quite overtly culture-driven[46] and has to be reckoned with in any analysis of human security on the continent. In Mali, for instance, only women have access to the Karite tree and its resources. The institutional context is therefore often closely linked to specific temporal, spatial and cultural contexts. Folkviews justify participation of certain groups in certain activities. In Burkina Faso, for example, women collect firewood and water; men lead prayers and name the newborn. Folkviews explain why certain types of wood must be gathered and why the naming of babies can only be executed on certain days of the week. Even the formation of women's groups and their specific way of engaging in environmental activity are rooted in culture and tradition. Taking the cultural context into consideration not only helps analysts to understand the dynamics of such activities better, but, more importantly, plays a pivotal role in the successful outcome of such campaigns. In Kenya, women's groups form part and parcel of the tribal custom and exist as avenues for social expression and mutual socio-economic help. The Green Belt Movement allows

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[43] Zein-Elabdin, p. 935; Mellor, p. 136.
[44] The World Bank in its 1998/1999 **Report, Knowledge for Development** (New York), acknowledges that local and traditional knowledge is now used more extensively in the promotion of sustainable farming practices. See pp. 101 and 110.
[45] Rodda, pp. 64, 68, 71; Calvert & Calvert, p. 239.
[46] Kirk, p. 72.

each group to organise its own campaign based on its own needs and this has contributed substantially towards its overall success. Even in India, the Chipko movement itself is based on the legend that the women of Bishnoi sacrificed themselves to save their trees from elimination by clinging to them. It could be speculated that women's commitment to saving the trees would not have been as strong if it had not been driven by deep-seated tradition.

The above examples thus suggest that traditional culture can work towards improving the security of women, men and the community as a whole. Feminists amongst others, however, remind us that in most cases the linkage between culture and gender specification is more enabling for men than for women. Nevertheless, in some cases men are also constrained by their socially and culturally determined gender roles. For instance, in Luapula, a matrilineal society in Zambia, women have sole rights to land.[47]

Many ecologically sound community development projects have been organised by African women. By 1992, women of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya had planted seven million trees. It is significant that in the district of Kiambu, where the rate of deforestation has slowed down, women represent almost 70 per cent of farm labour.[48] Another example of an environmental movement driven by women is the grassroots Women's Tree Planting Movement in Uganda.

Women's contribution to sustainable ecological practices must be recognised and rewarded through, amongst others, policy decisions on local, national and regional level. Addressing women farmers' economic insecurity by providing appropriate technological assistance and credit facilities are some of the ways in which the prospects of environmentally sound agricultural practices may be enhanced. In order to ensure that women's needs are met at all levels, prolonged and stable interaction between women's groups and official structures is a prerequisite.

6.   CONCLUDING PERSPECTIVES

A top-down global discourse on women's and gender issues in the form of policies and declarations works in tandem with bottom-up, localised responses. A theoretical dissection of the nexus between human security, the environment and women forms the backdrop against which a contextualised approach can take shape. A focus on the institutional context is useful, firstly, to fully understand the institutions and processes at work in relation to the environment. Secondly, it helps

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[47]   Zein-Elabdin, pp. 939-41.
[48]   Zein-Elabdin, p. 936.

to highlight gender-specific attitudes and actions towards the environment and use of natural resources within different historical and cultural milieus. Thirdly, and following from the previous point, it can contribute towards legitimating gender as an area of study in the environmental security domain. Lastly, since a contextual approach places women's relation to the environment in its historical and cultural context, it facilitates appropriate policy approaches and options.

In sum, the overall value of this approach in any discourse or area of study lies in the fact that, when gender is used as a tool of analysis, it remains sensitive to the multiplicity and complexity of the various contexts. This creates the "perfect" setting for exposing and redefining power relations.

Developing an environmental ethic, which seeks to respect the fractious holism of the ecosystem as having value in itself and not simply because of its possible utility or threat to human beings, may ultimately be the goal to strive for. For this to happen, however, a much broader view of human security is required.