

ecofeminism

ecofeminism, branch of feminism that examines the connections between women and nature. Its name was coined by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. Ecofeminism uses the basic feminist tenets of equality between genders, a revaluing of non-patriarchal or nonlinear structures, and a view of the world that respects

organic processes, holistic connections, and the merits of intuition and collaboration. To these notions ecofeminism adds both a commitment to the environment and an awareness of the associations made between women and nature. Specifically, this philosophy emphasizes the ways both nature and women are treated by patriarchal (or male-centred) society. Ecofeminists examine the effect of gender categories in order to demonstrate the ways in which social norms exert unjust dominance over women and nature. The philosophy also contends that those norms lead to an incomplete view of the world, and its practitioners advocate an alternative worldview that values the earth as sacred, recognizes humanity's dependency on the natural world, and embraces all life as valuable.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Introduction
- Origins of ecofeminism
- Radical ecofeminism and cultural ecofeminism
- Ecofeminism's future

Origins of ecofeminism

The modern ecofeminist movement was born out of a series of conferences and workshops held in the United States by a coalition of academic and professional women during the late 1970s and early 1980s. They met to discuss the ways in which feminism and environmentalism might be combined to promote respect for women and the natural world and were motivated by the notion that a long historical precedent of associating women with nature had led to the oppression of both. They noted that women and nature were often depicted as chaotic, irrational, and in need of control, while men were

frequently characterized as rational, ordered, and thus capable of directing the use and development of women and nature. Ecofeminists contend that this arrangement results in a hierarchical structure that grants power to men and allows for the exploitation of women and nature, particularly insofar as the two are associated with one another. Thus, early ecofeminists determined that solving the predicament of either constituency would require undoing the social status of both.

Early work on ecofeminism consisted largely of first documenting historical connections between women and the environment and then looking for ways to sever those connections. One founder of ecofeminism, theologian Rosemary Ruether, insisted that all women must acknowledge and work to end the domination of nature if they were to work toward their own liberation. She urged women and environmentalists to work together to end patriarchal systems that privilege hierarchies, control, and unequal socioeconomic relations. Ruether's challenge was taken up by feminist scholars and activists, who began critiquing not only ecological theories that overlooked the effect of patriarchal systems but also feminist theories that did not interrogate the relationship between women and nature as well.

By the late 1980s, ecofeminism had grown out of its largely academic environment and become a popular movement. Many scholars cite the feminist theorist Ynestra King as the cause of that popularization. In 1987 King wrote an article titled "What Is Ecofeminism?" that appeared in *The Nation*. There she challenged all Americans to consider the ways in which their belief systems allow for the exploitative use of the earth and the further oppression of women. With the help of King's article, the concept of ecofeminism grew both in support and philosophical scope.

Radical ecofeminism and cultural ecofeminism

As ecofeminism continued to develop, it witnessed the first of several splinterings. By the late 1980s ecofeminism had begun to branch out into two distinct schools of thought: radical ecofeminism and cultural ecofeminism. Radical ecofeminists contend that the dominant patriarchal society equates

nature and women in order to degrade both. To that end, radical ecofeminism builds on the assertion of early ecofeminists that one must study patriarchal domination with an eye toward ending the associations between women and nature. Of particular interest to those theorists is the ways in which both women and nature have been associated with negative or commodifiable attributes while men have been seen as capable of establishing order. That division of characteristics encourages the exploitation of women and nature for cheap labour and resources.

Cultural ecofeminists, on the other hand, encourage an association between women and the environment. They contend that women have a more intimate relationship with nature because of their gender roles (e.g., family nurturer and provider of food) and their biology (e.g., menstruation, pregnancy, and lactation). As a result, cultural ecofeminists believe that such associations allow women to be more sensitive to the sanctity and degradation of the environment. They suggest that this sensitivity ought to be prized by society insofar as it establishes a more direct connection to the natural world with which humans must coexist. Cultural ecofeminism also has roots in nature-based religions and goddess and nature worship as a way of redeeming both the spirituality of nature and women's instrumental role in that spirituality.

Not all feminists favoured the bifurcation of ecofeminism. Some women, for instance, worried that cultural ecofeminism merely enforces gender stereotypes and could lead to further exploitation. Others wanted a greater emphasis on nature-based religion, while still others insisted that a celebration of Western organized religions could accommodate nature-based worship. Those same groups also differed with regard to the romanticization of nature and the roles that various practices (such as vegetarianism or organic farming) ought to play in the application of ecofeminist principles. As a result, the movement continued to grow and expand in order to accommodate those variations, and most self-identified ecofeminists celebrate the myriad definitions and applications available under the general rubric of ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism's future

Many women remained unsatisfied with the limits of the movement. Of particular concern was the failure of women in developed countries to acknowledge the ways in which their own lifestyles were leading to further degradation of their counterparts in less-developed countries and of the Earth as a whole. Women from developing countries pointed to the effects of commercial food production, sweatshop labour, and poverty on their families and their landscapes. They accused white ecofeminists of promoting that exploitation by purchasing goods created as a result of inequity. They also took issue with the appropriation of indigenous cultures and religions for the purpose of advancing a philosophical position. Thus, contemporary ecofeminism must be developed to acknowledge the very real effects of race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality on a woman's social position. Women involved in environmental justice issues and women representing minority cultures have worked to establish their own sense of ecofeminism to include local cultures and spirituality, a celebration of their roles as mothers and caretakers, and a recognition of the ways in which Western colonization compromised those beliefs.

Many ecofeminists were also concerned with what they saw as a heterosexual bias in the movement insofar as ecofeminism appeared to privilege the experience of heterosexual women over homosexual women. To correct that problem, an emerging school of ecofeminism emphasized the need to incorporate the tenets of queer theory into the precepts of ecofeminism. They contended that if ecofeminism is indeed committed to fighting against systems of oppression and domination, then the movement must also acknowledge the ways in which sexuality—and, more specifically, responses to that sexuality—also figure as oppressive mechanisms. Thus, the redemption of women's roles and opportunities must also include a valuing of sexual differences as well as differences in race, class, and gender.

Ecofeminist scholars often contend that the great plurality of beliefs within ecofeminism is one of the movement's greatest strengths. They note that the myriad definitions and applications, which sometimes complement and sometimes conflict with one another, demonstrate the liberating and inclusive

aspects of the movement. They also point to the important commonalities shared within the various schools of ecofeminism. All ecofeminists, they say, work toward the development of theory and action that acknowledge the problems inherent in patriarchal and hierarchical systems. They advocate the revaluing of science to acknowledge the role of subjectivity and intuition. They also support the creation of a new worldview that celebrates all biological systems as inherently valuable. Finally, they insist on solving those problems through affirming and nonviolent means.

Kathryn Miles

CITATION INFORMATION**ARTICLE TITLE:** ecofeminism**WEBSITE NAME:** Encyclopaedia Britannica**PUBLISHER:** Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.**DATE PUBLISHED:** 23 October 2024**URL:** <https://www.britannica.com/topic/ecofeminism>**ACCESS DATE:** September 02, 2026