

Teaching About Women, the Environment and Mother Earth

This article is a reflective examination of developing and teaching a course on women and the environment over a ten-year period. The course, "Women, the Environment and Change," has evolved with a strong ecofeminist perspective and broadly encompasses a range of feminist theoretical views and practical lived realities that show a linkage between the oppression of women and the oppression of the environment, or when viewed as an entity, of Nature or Mother Earth. An important part of the learning outcomes of this course has been to help students understand ecofeminist principles and to forge connections between their own lives and the importance of protecting and valuing their own home place on Mother Earth. Course content explores a variety of ecofeminist theoretical perspectives and examines several key concepts such as sustainable development, ecological footprints, an ethic of care, instrumental and non-instrumental value, flourishing, environmental racism, speciesism, and precautionary principles. We also explore environmental health issues as they pertain to women and their families on a global scale including the environmental links to breast cancer and passing toxins from mother to infant through the umbilical cord and later through breast feeding. Special environmental health concerns of women in developing countries and issues linked to poverty, racism and colonialism are also examined. Finally, we discuss several ways of becoming an activist for the environment and Mother Earth including creative use of writing, art and film.

Human beings owe our lives and the quality of living and existence to Mother Earth, our true mother, as well as to the mothers or women who raise us, nurture us, and sustain us into the future.... [Therefore] the ideology of motherhood and mothering begins with our first mother, Mother Earth. (Bedard 73)

Mother Earth is a unique, indivisible, self-regulating community of interrelated beings that sustains, contains and reproduces all beings. (Universal Declaration for the Rights of Mother Earth, article 1(2))

In 2001 when I first envisioned a new course on women and environmental activism I could not have hoped that ten years later a Declaration for the Rights of Mother Earth would be debated in the General Assembly of the United Nations. The debate was held on April 20, 2011, just before International Mother Earth Day, and was based on the declaration brought forward by Evo Morales, Bolivia's president and the first indigenous leader of a country in Latin America. A new book called *The Rights of Nature: the Case for a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth* (Council of Canadians) was launched at the same time in conjunction with the debate. Another book, *Grandmothers Counsel the World: Women Elders Offer Their Vision for Our Planet* (Schaefer) brought together the collected wisdom and guidance of the International Council of Thirteen Grandmothers who advocate for a way of living with care and sustainability to protect our global home. These are all indications of a growing trend to recognize both the ethical and essential importance of linking the survival of humans and all life on earth to caring for and protecting Mother Earth. The personal has become very political in a profound way in the protection of the environment and an ethic of care is now challenging the powerful establishment, including governments, economists, and multinational corporations. It is not an easy struggle and there are still many opposing views but the message is gaining momentum and those whose voices have often been silenced, women and indigenous people, are often in the forefront.

Background to the Course “Women the Environment and Change”

The course I birthed in 2001 developed out of my own interest in the environment and other species that had sprouted when I was a child. This interest had grown and developed during my graduate work in biological anthropology and activism in environmental groups such as Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund, along with work in animal welfare groups. My views on the necessity of a humane and caring world to raise children in, was bolstered when I became a mother myself in the 1980s. Eventually I brought my science and environmental background to Women's Studies in the 1990s and combined it with feminism.

One outcome of the coalescing of these life threads was the creation of the course titled “Women, the Environment and Change.” As this course evolved it became ever more apparent to me that women, children, indigenous people,

the poor and oppressed, and non-human others were the most harmed by environmental degradation and harm to our home place, Mother Earth. The course is taught from an ecofeminist perspective, which broadly encompasses a range of feminist theoretical views and practical lived realities that show a linkage between the oppression of women and the oppression of the environment, or when viewed as an entity, of Nature or Mother Earth (Cuomo 22). I feel that it is important to combine this theoretical examination of ecofeminist principles and ethics with their practical application to environmental problems. An important part of the learning outcomes of this course have been to help students understand ecofeminist principles and to forge connections between their own lives and the importance of protecting and valuing their own home place on Mother Earth. This has opened up opportunities for students to reclaim their personal agency and empowerment while providing pathways for them to embrace environmental activism in a variety of ways both personally and globally.

Students

“Women, the Environment and Change” is now a regular part of the Women’s and Gender Studies program and is a required component in the Environmental Science program where it is the only course that has a large ethical component to its pedagogy. Over the past ten years, 268 students have taken this course. Class size varies from 15 to 65 students and it is taught in both regular classroom and televised formats. Students are primarily women although there are usually some men in the classes. There are a large number of Aboriginal students at the University of Regina, which has links to the First Nations University of Canada. There are also many international and immigrant students and many students come from rural backgrounds. Therefore the students in this class often come from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds leading to a diversity of viewpoints enriching our class discussions. Although this is a 200 level Women’s and Gender Studies course, many students come from a variety of academic levels from second year to graduate students and from various academic disciplines across the humanities, social sciences and physical sciences. Many have little background in either feminist or environmental studies and that adds to the challenges but also the rewards of teaching this course.

Learning objectives for the students are outlined in the next sections. They are obtained through a multi-layered combination of readings, lectures, small and large group discussions, films, guest speakers, in-class response questions, a research assignment on the work of environmental activists, an assignment on ecocritical literary analysis and a creative assignment that allows them to

show a link to their own home place in the environment through writing, art or film. Assessment including a fuller discussion of the assignments and exams along with student views on their learning are discussed later in the paper.

Learning Objectives

1) To understand your place within the environment and how it affects you on a personal level.

The first learning objective ensures that students understand their connection to their environment. We discuss what is meant by the environment and environments (both natural and built), ecology, ecosystems and holism. This is crucial since many students have little background in life sciences. To get them started thinking about their environments and what they care about, students are asked to draw a diagram of “caring circles” with themselves at the centre linking out to circles representing what they care about such as individual people, animals, places, activities, ideals etc. They then draw another level of circles to indicate their concerns about the environment and draw connections from these concerns to what is in their care circles. We then break into small groups to share and discuss their cares and concerns about the environment on a personal as well as a broader level.

2) To understand the links between women and the environment or nature and ecofeminism.

We examine the historical and philosophical connections between the oppression of women and nature and their roots in the Scientific Revolution of the 1600s (Merchant). We also look at the early rising of the ecofeminist movement in the 1970s growing out of a link between the feminist movement with the new ecology movement (Merchant). Ecofeminism, as stated, is viewed as an umbrella term covering a variety of feminist theoretical perspectives on women and the environment. These range from views claiming spiritual and intuitive or reproductive links between women and nature and that urge women to reclaim their power by re-connecting to Mother Earth (Griffin), to theoretical views that locate women’s oppression in their socially defined roles as mothers and caretakers of their homes and families (Shiva). In these later views women, especially mothers, are often the first to recognize the harm from environmental degradation as illness in their children and loss of resources needed to sustain their families. Here patriarchal sexism interacts with other forms of oppression such as racism, classism and colonialism to disadvantage some women more than other women (Shiva; Denton). In either end of the spectrum the link between oppression of nature and the oppression of women, especially mothers, is clear. Some writers have questioned the validity of the

first view, linking women to Mother Earth and Nature, and see it as harmful or problematic (MacGregor). However, others feel that the complexity of an ecofeminist perspective is best shown by including this view along with others (Cudworth; Cuomo) and this is the way I teach the class as well.

3) *To understand key ecological concepts crucial in protecting Mother Earth.*

An Ethic of Care that includes all human groups and all species is worth striving for under an ecofeminist view. Caring is often gendered as women's work and expected as part of their maternal role, therefore often devalued (Waring). However, an ecofeminist ethic of care recognizes the interdependence of all individuals and that extra care and consideration should be given to those individuals and groups most vulnerable to the effects of our choices (Cuomo).

Sustainable Development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. An ecofeminist view would also include the present and future needs of non-human others. We discuss how difficult it is for people in developing countries living in poverty to meet this standard and the role that over-consumption and non-sustainable development in the developed world plays in this.

Ecological Footprints refers to the effect of our consumer choices on the global ecosystem. On a personal level your ecological footprint measures the effects of your choices in areas of food, housing, transportation and consumer goods and services on the finite and available productive land available for all humans to share. Canada had the fourth largest ecological footprint in the world in 2007.

Valuing placed on other beings often depends on whether they are perceived as useful to humans (Cuomo). Something that is useful to humans is said to have instrumental or "use value." If harm is done to something that has instrumental value the real harm is done to the human who is affected. If something has value above and beyond its use to humans it is said to have non-instrumental or intrinsic value. When harm is done to something that has non-instrumental value it is harmed directly. If only instrumental value is taken into account, anything becomes vulnerable to harm if it is perceived as not having use to humans. Women's unpaid work and many parts of nature are seen to have no value so are not considered in decisions affecting the environment (Waring).

Flourishing is another ecofeminist concept and refers to the continued well-being of individuals, species, ecosystems and communities (Cuomo). Non-human and human communities and individuals are intertwined. The flourishing of one often depends on the flourishing of the other and nothing in a biological or social community can flourish on its own. Physical, emotional and social well-being are all connected. From an ecofeminist standpoint the flourishing of

individuals, species, communities and ecosystems are all equally important.

Environmental Racism is a form of oppression that causes environmental harm through racist attitudes and practises. It occurs when people of visible minorities, indigenous people, poor people or members of any other disadvantaged social group are harmed, or harmed more than, socially and economically privileged groups. Examples of this include the clear cutting of forests or disposing of radioactive or other toxic waste on or near traditional aboriginal hunting and fishing areas and the placement of garbage dumps, toxic landfills or building heavily polluting industries in close proximity to aboriginal reserves and slum areas of cities (Smith).

Speciesism is discrimination based on the belief that the human species is superior to all other species and leads to oppression of non-human others. How deeply speciesism is ingrained in westernized societies and how it is linked to sexist attitudes can be seen in the way domestic animals as well as women are often kept confined and exploited for the products of their reproduction or sexuality (Dunayer). Female domestic animals such as chickens, dairy cows, mares, bitches, and sows are kept in tightly controlled and inhumane environments such as factory farms and puppy mills and exploited. In our class we discuss many aspects of this including comparisons to the domesticated status and expectations of mothers under patriarchal ideals. We also look at a spectrum of animal rights issues from an ecofeminist tradition (Donovan and Adams).

The Precautionary Principle which states that when an activity is suspected of harming human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically. This principle advocates always choosing the least harmful way of proceeding in cases of uncertainty since science cannot always give a clear picture or may take an unacceptably long time to do so (Wyman). We discuss in class whether women's socially defined roles as mothers and caregivers make them more sensitive to this principle and also relate this principle to the protection of Mother Earth.

4) To understand the link between environmental harm and the health concerns of women and their families.

Discovering the link between the health of the environment and Mother Earth and the health of their families hits close to home for many students. Environmental contaminants aren't confined by political or social boundaries and the environmental harm first felt by those discriminated against under environmental racism and speciesism will ultimately harm us all.

The pioneering work of Rachel Carson is discussed early in this section since Carson was the first scientist to clearly inform the public in simple language

about the growing dangers posed to humans and non-human species from chemical pollution and environmental harm. Her book, *Silent Spring* was seen as a challenge to the scientific establishment and caused a backlash to discredit her work from many in the scientific, political and industrial elite who called her an overly emotional and hysterical woman (Norwood). However, Carson empowered many people to question the scientific establishment about environmental issues and encouraged many women to join environmental movements and become activists.

Carson's work is instructive as students look at the contemporary health concerns women face today from environmental contamination and pollution. Toxins come from a wide variety of industrial and agricultural chemicals as well as nuclear power stations, power lines, household chemicals, x-rays, and many consumer products including plastics which contain phytoestrogens which mimic female hormones in the body (Bertell). These toxins combine in our bodies with an additive effect on our health especially since they are stored and accumulate in fatty tissue. Women's breasts are composed of fat tissue and there is an increasing link being seen between breast cancer and environmental pollution (Steingraber). We discuss several readings on this topic (Batt; Ransom; Matuschka) and view the film, *Exposure: The Environmental Links to Breast Cancer*. We move on to read and discuss the moving and informative memoir by Sandra Steingraber called *Having Faith: An Ecologist's Journey to Motherhood* on the difficult choice to become a mother knowing all the environmental risks as an ecologist. This reading demonstrates how the accumulation of toxins in women's breasts can be passed from mother to child during breast-feeding and toxins in mothers' bodies can be passed to their growing fetuses through the umbilical cord. Further reproductive problems for mothers include increased risks of miscarriages, birth deformities in their children and sterility.

Women in developing countries have special risks because they often live and work beside or in contaminated environments and are seldom given education about or protection from these contaminants. In most cases they have no choice but to stay in these hazardous environments because of poverty and lack of power in the home and workplace (Kisting). Regardless of risks, mothers must care for and work to feed their children. In homes where fire is used for cooking women inhale smoke on a daily basis. When they work in fields for commercial agriculture at low pay they are often exposed to pesticide spraying as they work barefoot, with no protective clothing and often with a baby on their back (Hussain). In factories they work in similar contaminated environments in sweat shop conditions (Srikhamdokkae).

Karen J. Warren discusses why trees, water, and agriculture among other topics are feminist issues. In developing countries it is part of the caring work

women do, to collect water and wood for their family and they often must walk great distances to do this. Short-sighted development projects often favour cash crops looked after by men over food crops grown by women to feed their families, sometimes destroying “junk” trees women count on for firewood and pollute drinking water with western industrial or forestry practices. This, along with the effects of climate change which is causing increased and severe droughts and fires in many areas, means that women must often travel greater distances to find trees for firewood and browse for their animals as well as water for their families to drink and cook with. Often they must collect water from sources that are polluted or are breeding grounds for malaria-carrying mosquitoes (Warren).

Women experience other heightened health risks from a combination of the effects of climate change and women’s gendered positions in society, especially in developing countries (Denton). Natural disasters such as tsunamis and floods generally affect women, especially mothers, and their children more harshly than men since women are more likely to be socially and economically disadvantaged. They are often in or near their homes, away from warning systems in the public areas. They usually have children with them that they need to collect and hang on to. Traditional clothing may hamper swimming or climbing out of harm’s way, and in fact many women do not learn how to swim or climb trees (Nelson et al.).

5) To discover ways students can become more active in caring for the environment on both personal and political levels.

It is important to empower students and give them a voice in positive change to counteract the feelings of hopelessness that often affects people hearing about environmental problems. The forms of activism we discuss are quite varied and include: making personal life changes to lower your ecological footprint; adopting more of a caring ethic; joining or forming a group to work toward improving an environmental problem of particular concern to you; taking an active part in resisting environmental harm to the environment through protest marches, blockades and civil disobedience; getting involved through letter writing, petitions and legal challenges; using creative writing, art and film as a way to inform people about environmental issues and connecting to Mother Earth.

I have found that the best way to inform students of these options is to bring in guest speakers to share their knowledge and experience in these forms of activism. The diversity of speakers I have invited to our class includes the following. Women, including mothers, who share the way they have personally committed to lower their ecological footprints and live more sustainably. Members of a local grassroots sustainability group, Regina EcoLiving who

discuss their book, *Ecoliving: Your Guide to Sustainable Living* (Sax, MacDonald and Hansen). Members of another local group, People for Animals, who talk about their volunteer work rescuing and rehabilitating feral cats and dogs and providing shelters, food and water to feral cat colonies where the animals have been vaccinated and sterilized by a veterinarian who works with them. A woman who has chemical sensitivities comes in to talk about the group she has formed to lobby for a ban on the use of pesticides in our city. An Aboriginal elder talks about the traditional link between caring for and walking softly on Mother Earth and how that is linked to traditional ways of mothering. Members from a province-wide environmental group, Nature Saskatchewan, which has developed many programs to protect endangered wildlife species and habitats, have often come to talk about their work. Another speaker is a grandmother who is involved in learning to build straw bale houses and who is retiring to an intentional community where everyone is living sustainably. An artist who combines images of Mother Earth along with environmental and maternal images in her paintings shares slides of her work with the class and discusses their meaning.

Films are also used to provide examples. One very effective film, *Fury for the Sound*, documents the largest civil disobedience protest and blockade in Canadian history at Clayoquot Sound on Vancouver Island in 1993. The protest lasted for months and was attempting to stop the clear cutting of the last great stand of temperate rain forest in North America. It was a woman led protest with 85 percent of the protesters and most of the organizers being women ranging in age from 8 to 80. Many mothers and grandmothers were there with their children. Hundreds of protestors were arrested and jailed. Another film used is *Near to Nature's Heart: the Women of Waskegwi*. This film documents the experiences of several women who have lived and worked in what is now known as Prince Albert National Park over the past century. It was researched, filmed, narrated, directed and produced by Susan Risk and Jeanne Corrigan, both from Saskatchewan. Jeanne's mother was an unpaid park warden who worked alongside her warden husband (who was paid) for decades in the park. This film is a good example of using creative processes to get out environmental messages. Other creative ways of being activist involve writing fiction, poetry, and non-fiction to raise critical awareness of environmental issues and to forge connections with the natural world. Several readings are used here (Butala; Cook; Whitson).

Assessment

Assessment of the Learning Objectives is obtained through a combination of assignments and exams. There are three main assignments students complete

during the course. The first is an ecocritical assignment where students are assigned a book—a memoir of a woman’s relationship with nature—to read and critically evaluate its feminist, ecofeminist, and environmental theme and message. Two books that work well for this assignment are Sharon Butala’s *Perfection of the Morning: an Apprenticeship in Nature* and Audrey Whitson’s *Teaching Places*.

The second assignment gives the students an opportunity to research activist organizations and make an oral presentation on their findings to the class. As part of the presentation they also compare the work done by the organization they have researched to the work of two organizations from our readings. They examine whether the organizations incorporate ecofeminist principles and ethical views in any aspect of their work and if not suggest how they might do this.

The final assignment in the class is the Creative Project that allows students to forge a personal link with Nature and the Environment in their own Home Place through creativity. Students are asked to relate their project in either writing or artwork to one of the following:

- 1) A place of special significance to them in their environment.
- 2) A special non-human “other” they honour
- 3) A message they want to leave their children or young people in general.

Students work on the project in class time and share the messages in them with each other. Projects have taken the form of short personal essays, poetry, short stories, collages of images or photos, posters, a slide show, clay work, sculptures, painting and drawing. This particular assignment is important to the students, and those who are mothers often include their children in some way. One mother made a poster of photos showing how she and her ten-year-old daughter cleaned up garbage in a local park. Another wrote poetry about canoeing in a wilderness area with her children. Students put much thought and effort into their creative projects. One particularly unusual one was a tampon tree which consisted of a piece of driftwood with several branches from which tampons and their plastic containers were hung along with small plastic containers holding messages about harm that was done to Mother Earth and to women from tampon use. This was based on material she had researched in her activist assignment. In the creative assignment students aren’t marked on their artistic or writing talent, but on the content of their message showing a genuine connection and understanding of the importance of preserving and sharing their home place on Mother Earth.

Two exams are given as an in-class midterm and a take-home final exam.

Questions on the final exam challenge students to use what they've learned about ecofeminist principles in practical ways on questions that deal with difficult ethical and practical problems. One example is to find the best solution in meeting conflicting needs for space between displaced refugees encroaching on a wildlife sanctuary where the last mountain gorillas live in Rwanda following the war. Another example is being an advisor on a development project to help an impoverished indigenous population and considering the merits and problems of three different development proposals submitted by a mining company promising jobs and a school, a bio-technology company testing genetically modified crops, and medical anthropologists anxious to learn about indigenous knowledge of medicinal plants.

Student Voices

The class "Women, the Environment and Change" has had a positive effect on many students which has been reflected in both conversations with me, class discussions and on written student evaluations of the course. Following are comments of several students reflecting an increased level of awareness of environmental challenges to Mother Earth and its inter-connected life-forms. They also reflect an increased feeling of agency and empowerment to work toward positive changes on a personal and global level as part of a vibrant eco-community to help protect Mother Earth. Following are examples from class evaluations.

This course seemed to break the structure of most environmental courses to incorporate elements of values, creativity, reflection and even hope. I truly enjoyed and learned from tackling the subjects we learned in this way.

This class has basically changed the way I think about the world and my place in it. I'm grateful to be able to share what I've learned with my family and we have great discussions at home.

I really related to Butala's Perfection of the Morning and could relate it to my experiences growing up on a farm in northern Saskatchewan. It made me realize how much my home place has meant to me and shaped who I am. I went "home" last weekend and saw it with new eyes.

I want my kids to have that chance to connect to the Earth too and see how we all are connected.

The course material is very relevant and thought provoking. I feel like

I have a totally new understanding of the world. I like thinking of the Earth as our Mother. It's about time we all did! I was especially inspired by the aboriginal elder and her story-telling of our connections to Mother Earth. From now on I hope to walk softly on the Earth and leave much less of a footprint.

Courses like this should be taught more often and at earlier levels—in high school, or even elementary. I took this course as an interesting sounding elective and never knew how much it would make me change my thinking.

Conclusion

Developing and teaching “Women, the Environment and Change” has taught me as much if not more than my students. I have discovered since I started teaching this course that the link between women’s roles as mothers, their acts of mothering, and the broader connection to valuing and protecting our home place on Mother Earth embodies a powerful learning tool. Far from advocating a harmful essentialist view of women I believe that it opens a path to empower women and gives them a voice to strategically advocate for environmental change at its deepest levels. If we, as human beings do owe our lives to Mother Earth and do belong to an inter-connected web that connects all life, it would be foolish to ignore this in our activism. An ecofeminist examination of the oppression of marginalized human groups including women, Indigenous peoples and the poor as well as non-human others, coupled with practical activist tools to overcome this, has proven a successful format for this class.

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