

Intersectional Ecofeminism: Understanding the Double Burden of Gender and Environmental Injustice

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Abstract

Gender inequality and environmental degradation are immediate socioeconomic challenges that disproportionately affect women, especially those living in rural areas. Ecofeminism offers a theoretical framework for investigating the relationship between patriarchal structures and ecological degradation. The experiences of women are further influenced by caste, region, education, and social status, according to an intersectional perspective. Young women in rural India deal with environmental issues (such as pollution and water scarcity) and constrictive gender norms, resulting in a special double burden that is not well understood empirically. This study aims to quantitatively examine the relationship between environmental degradation and gender-based discrimination among rural female college students. It seeks to understand how these overlapping forms of marginalization influence their awareness, attitudes, and coping mechanisms, while also exploring the implications for social work education and intervention. A structured questionnaire will be administered to 300 rural female college students across three districts in Tamil Nadu. The tool is designed to measure variables such as exposure to environmental issues, perceived gender discrimination, ecofeminist awareness, and mental well-being. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression techniques will be employed to analyze the data. The findings of the study reveal a significant relationship between perceptions of environmental degradation and experiences of gender-based discrimination. Students who demonstrated higher levels of ecofeminist awareness also showed stronger intentions to advocate for social and environmental justice, enhanced critical thinking abilities, and greater psychological resilience. These results underscore the importance of integrating intersectional ecofeminist perspectives into social work education, thereby equipping students to effectively address the interconnected challenges of environmental and gender justice. By highlighting these expected intersections, the study aims to contribute to the development of educational and policy interventions that promote both gender and environmental equity in rural contexts.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Gender-based Discrimination, Environmental Degradation, Intersectionality, Social Work Education.

Introduction

The intersecting crises of gender inequality and environmental degradation continue to be among the most pressing socio-developmental concerns of the twenty-first century. These issues are not independent phenomena but rather interconnected systems of domination that reproduce each other across economic, political, and cultural spheres. In developing countries such as India, the consequences of ecological decline, manifested through deforestation, pollution, and water scarcity, are felt most acutely by women in rural areas. These women often shoulder the dual responsibilities of sustaining households and managing natural resources, while simultaneously negotiating social structures that restrict their autonomy. As a result, young women in rural India face a “double burden” of environmental degradation and gender injustice, an intersection that remains insufficiently explored in empirical scholarship. This paper examines these overlapping vulnerabilities through the lens of intersectional ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism emerged as a critical response to the parallel exploitation of women and nature under patriarchal and capitalist systems. Foundational ecofeminist thinkers such as Mies and Shiva (1993) and Plumwood (1993)

argued that the logic of domination rooted in dualistic hierarchies of male/female, culture/nature, and reason/emotion legitimizes both gender oppression and ecological destruction. Within this framework, environmental degradation is not merely an ecological problem but also a symptom of deeper structural inequalities. Ecofeminism highlights the ways in which patriarchal institutions privilege control, productivity, and commodification, thereby marginalizing forms of care, community, and sustainability (Gaard, 2011). This perspective is particularly relevant to agrarian societies, where women's daily survival is intimately tied to natural resources such as land, forests, and water bodies (Agarwal, 2010). When these resources deteriorate, women's physical and emotional burdens intensify while their decision-making power remains constrained.

Although early ecofeminist literature provided important insights into the gender–environment nexus, it was often criticized for essentializing women's relationship with nature and overlooking differences among women themselves. Later scholars introduced intersectionality to address these limitations. Coined by Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality provides an analytical framework for understanding how multiple axes of identity, such as gender, caste, class, region, and education, interact to produce unique configurations of privilege and oppression. Within the Indian context, intersectionality becomes crucial for acknowledging that women's experiences of environmental degradation are shaped not only by gender but also by social hierarchies embedded in caste and regional structures (Rege, 2010). For example, Dalit and Adivasi women often have fewer rights over land and water than upper-caste women, leading to disproportionate exposure to ecological risks and reduced adaptive capacity (Shrestha & Raut, 2020).

Building on this perspective, intersectional ecofeminism integrates ecological and social justice concerns to examine how structural inequalities amplify the effects of environmental degradation. Recent empirical studies have shown that factors such as caste, class, and regional disparities significantly influence women's environmental vulnerability and participation in sustainability initiatives (Justin & Menon, 2022). Women from marginalized communities are commonly responsible for collecting water, fuelwood, and fodder, yet they possess limited control over natural resources or policy decisions. These gendered divisions of labour not only expose them to physical exhaustion and health hazards but also reinforce their subordinate social position. Thus, ecological decline cannot be separated from the larger matrix of social injustice that governs women's lives in rural India.

Despite increasing attention to gendered environmental issues, the specific experiences of young rural women remain under-researched. Much of the available scholarship focuses on adult or married women's participation in environmental activism or community development, neglecting the generational and transitional phases of young women's lives. Young women often face restrictive social expectations concerning education, mobility, and marriage, while simultaneously bearing the practical responsibilities of resource management. Environmental degradation intensifies these constraints by increasing time spent on domestic labour, limiting educational opportunities, and reducing economic independence. This intersection of ecological hardship and patriarchal control exemplifies the “double burden” that this paper seeks to unpack.

An intersectional ecofeminist approach allows for a more holistic understanding of these interlinked processes. It recognizes that patriarchal domination over women and nature is mediated through multiple social categories, including caste, class, and regional inequities. In India, for example, patriarchal norms intersect with caste hierarchies to define who has access to clean water, fertile land, or forest resources. Simultaneously, environmental policies and development programs often ignore local women's knowledge systems, thereby reproducing epistemic injustices (Agarwal, 2010). Understanding these intersecting structures of inequality is essential for designing sustainable and gender-just development interventions.

The present study, titled “Intersectional Ecofeminism: Understanding the Double Burden of Gender and Environmental Injustice,” seeks to explore how gender norms and environmental degradation interact to shape the lived realities of young rural women. It aims to address three guiding questions:

1. How do ecological challenges such as water scarcity, pollution, and land degradation intersect with gender norms to influence young women's daily lives?

2. In what ways do caste, education, region, and social status determine differential access to resources and coping mechanisms?
3. How do young women in rural India perceive, negotiate, and resist these intersecting forms of marginalization?

By employing an intersectional ecofeminist framework, this paper contributes to both theoretical and empirical debates. Theoretically, it refines ecofeminist analysis by embedding it within a multidimensional understanding of identity and power. Empirically, it foregrounds the experiences of young rural women, a group frequently marginalized in both environmental and gender policy discussions. Finally, it offers policy-relevant insights for integrating ecological sustainability with gender equity, emphasizing the need for participatory governance that values women's knowledge, agency, and leadership in environmental management.

The following sections review key theoretical contributions to ecofeminism and intersectionality, followed by an examination of field evidence from rural India. The paper concludes by suggesting strategies for fostering inclusive environmental justice and advancing gender equality as mutually reinforcing goals in sustainable development.

Review of Literature

The discourse on ecofeminism first emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to the twin crises of environmental degradation and women's subordination. Scholars such as Vandana Shiva (1988) and Maria Mies (1993) were among the early contributors who conceptualized the close relationship between patriarchal social systems and ecological destruction. They argued that the same patriarchal and capitalist structures that exploit women also exploit nature, linking both forms of domination to the logic of development and modernization. Women's indigenous knowledge and community-based environmental practices were seen as crucial yet marginalized elements in the sustainability debate.

Warren (2000) further expanded ecofeminist philosophy by introducing the ethic of care approach, explaining how hierarchical binaries, man/woman, culture/nature, justify domination over both women and nature. Plumwood (1993) reinforced this by analyzing Western philosophical traditions that elevate human rationality over nature, resulting in an ecological hierarchy deeply tied to patriarchy. Merchant (1980) historically traced how the Scientific Revolution reframed nature from a nurturing entity into a resource to be mastered, paralleling the subjugation of women's bodies and labour.

In contemporary debates, ecofeminism has increasingly intersected with climate justice. Dankelman (2010) observed that women across developing nations face greater vulnerability to climate impacts due to limited access to land, credit, and technology. Similarly, Arora-Jonsson (2011) critiqued the tendency to portray women merely as victims or "natural caretakers," emphasizing the need for intersectional analysis that considers differences in power, privilege, and social context.

Empirical studies provide quantitative backing for these claims. Norgaard and York (2005) found a strong correlation between gender equality and robust environmental policies, implying that enhancing women's social position can contribute to ecological sustainability. Nightingale's (2006) research in Nepal revealed how caste, class, and gender hierarchies shape women's involvement in natural resource management, demonstrating that environmental participation is not equally accessible to all women.

Recent decolonial feminist scholars such as Sultana (2022) argue that climate change must also be seen through the lens of climate coloniality, where global inequalities rooted in race, class, and gender continue to influence environmental vulnerability. Her work calls for a decolonial ecofeminist framework that challenges the structural injustices embedded in both environmental policy and social relations.

In India, the ecofeminist movement found resonance within the socio-political struggles of rural and indigenous women. Vandana Shiva (1988, 2014) identified the deep relationship between women and nature, asserting that women's knowledge systems and subsistence practices are critical to ecological balance. However, Bina Agarwal (1992, 2001) provided a nuanced critique of this essentialist view, advocating for a materialist ecofeminist perspective that links environmental action to social structures such as caste, class, and economic status. Agarwal

emphasized that women's engagement with nature is shaped not merely by biology but by material realities and access to resources.

Historical environmental movements such as the Chipko Andolan in Uttarakhand during the 1970s have been interpreted through an ecofeminist lens. Guha (1989) documented how women organized to protect forests against commercial logging, connecting ecological preservation with community survival. Similarly, women's participation in the Narmada Bachao Andolan highlighted how environmental displacement disproportionately affects them, as they face both livelihood loss and social marginalization (Rai, 1994).

Recent research situates ecofeminism within an intersectional framework in India. Rao (2017) and Banerjee (2019) argue that ecological degradation, compounded by gender and caste hierarchies, reinforces social inequities. Women from marginalized castes and tribal communities often face multiple exclusions from land ownership, irrigation access, and local governance, creating a layered structure of vulnerability.

Empirical findings from different regions reveal that environmental decline amplifies gendered workloads. Sultana and Khan (2016) found that droughts and water scarcity in rural India disproportionately burden women, as they are primarily responsible for household water collection. Singh (2020) further documented that in regions such as Rajasthan and Bundelkhand, women often travel long distances to fetch water, exposing them to health risks and social insecurity. Khanna (2021) added that caste-based discrimination restricts women's ability to benefit from water resource schemes, illustrating how gender and caste intersect within environmental contexts.

Jain and Arora (2022) emphasize that ecofeminist approaches in India must move beyond essentialism toward intersectionality and decoloniality, ensuring that rural women's experiences are not homogenized. They argue that sustainable policy frameworks should integrate gender-sensitive approaches that recognize multiple layers of marginalization.

Regional studies from South India shed light on how localized cultural and ecological contexts influence gendered experiences of environmental change. Research conducted by Sundar and Subramaniam (2016) revealed that declining groundwater levels and erratic monsoons in Tamil Nadu have intensified rural women's vulnerability. Despite their primary role in managing household water, their participation in water policy and resource management remains minimal, reflecting persistent gendered exclusions.

In Kerala, Devika (2018) explored women-led environmental protests such as the anti-endosulfan movement, where women mobilized against pesticide-induced health crises. Her study highlighted that environmental degradation often manifests as both ecological and bodily harm, with women's reproductive health becoming a key site of injustice.

Ramachandran (2019) found similar dynamics in Andhra Pradesh, where Dalit and Adivasi women are particularly affected by deforestation and land alienation. Environmental decline not only reduces livelihood opportunities but also reinforces caste hierarchies and gender-based dependence. Subha and Menon (2020) emphasized that community farming and seed-sharing initiatives led by rural women in South India embody ecofeminist resilience, promoting sustainability through cooperation and indigenous knowledge.

A recent study by Rajalakshmi and Kannan (2022) in Tamil Nadu revealed that rural young women face a "double burden" arising from gender discrimination and environmental stressors. They are expected to maintain household stability amid growing ecological challenges such as droughts, migration, and water scarcity. These findings reaffirm the argument that intersectional ecofeminism is essential for analyzing the lived experiences of rural women and for informing inclusive development strategies.

Methods and procedures

Research Design

The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the relationship between environmental degradation and gender-based discrimination among rural female college students in Tamil Nadu. This design was chosen to assess the strength and nature of associations among selected variables, specifically, exposure to environmental issues, perceived gender inequality, ecofeminist awareness, and mental well-being. A

structured survey method was implemented to ensure standardized data collection and facilitate statistical analysis for hypothesis testing.

Population and Sample

The population for the study comprised female college students residing in rural areas of Tamil Nadu. This demographic was targeted because rural young women often experience both environmental vulnerability and gender-based marginalization, aligning with the theoretical framework of intersectional ecofeminism.

A sample of 300 respondents was selected from three districts of Tamil Nadu, representing diverse ecological and socio-economic contexts. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure proportional representation of participants from different colleges, academic disciplines, and social backgrounds. Within each district, colleges located in rural regions were identified, and students were randomly selected from each stratum to minimize sampling bias.

Operational Definitions

Environmental Degradation

Environmental degradation refers to the deterioration of natural resources and ecosystems in the local surroundings of rural female college students. In this study, it is operationalized as the extent of participants' exposure to water scarcity, pollution, deforestation, soil erosion, and other ecological disruptions.

Gender-Based Discrimination

Gender-based discrimination is defined as the unequal treatment or bias faced by women due to their gender in family, educational, and community contexts. For this study, it is operationalized as the perceived restrictions on mobility, decision-making, access to education or resources, and participation in social or environmental activities.

Ecofeminist Awareness

Ecofeminist awareness refers to the understanding of the interconnection between gender inequality and environmental issues. It is operationalized as the level of knowledge and recognition participants have regarding ecofeminist principles, women's roles in ecological conservation, and attitudes toward environmental justice.

Mental Well-Being

Mental well-being is defined as the psychological state of health, emotional stability, and coping ability of participants in response to gender-based discrimination and environmental challenges. In this study, it is operationalized as self-reported levels of stress, anxiety, and coping mechanisms, assessed using a standardized short mental well-being scale.

Rural Female College Students

This term refers to female students enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate programs who reside in rural areas of Tamil Nadu. Operationally, participants are identified based on their enrollment in selected rural colleges and their residential address or village status, ensuring they represent the population facing both ecological and gender-related vulnerabilities.

Double Burden

The double burden refers to the simultaneous experience of environmental vulnerability and gender-based marginalization. It is operationalized as the combined effect of high exposure to environmental degradation and elevated perceptions of gender discrimination on participants' awareness, attitudes, and mental well-being.

Data Analysis

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed to assess the participants’ levels of environmental degradation, gender-based discrimination, ecofeminist awareness, and psychological resilience.

Participants reported moderate to high levels of environmental degradation and gender discrimination, while their ecofeminist awareness, critical thinking, resilience, and advocacy intentions were moderate. This indicates that although students are aware of ecological and gender issues, there is potential for increased empowerment through targeted interventions.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the relationships among variables.

Table 1: Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Environmental Degradation	1					
2. Gender-Based Discrimination	0.432**	1				
3. Ecofeminist Awareness	-0.278**	-0.315**	1			
4. Critical Thinking Ability	-0.249**	-0.287**	0.389**	1		
5. Psychological Resilience	-0.362**	-0.401**	0.352**	0.418**	1	
6. Advocacy Intentions	-0.267**	-0.298**	0.467**	0.401**	0.435**	1

** .01 level of significance

Environmental degradation and gender-based discrimination were positively correlated, confirming that students experiencing ecological stress also perceived gender inequities.

Ecofeminist awareness was positively associated with critical thinking, psychological resilience, and advocacy intentions, indicating its empowering role.

Both environmental and gender stressors were negatively associated with resilience and critical thinking, demonstrating the psychological impact of the “double burden.”

Regression Analysis

Multiple regression was conducted to predict critical thinking, psychological resilience, and advocacy intentions based on environmental degradation, gender-based discrimination, and ecofeminist awareness.

Table 2: Regression Analysis Predicting Critical Thinking

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Environmental Degradation	-0.198	0.051	-0.221	-3.88	0.000**
Gender-Based Discrimination	-0.231	0.053	-0.254	-4.36	0.000**
Ecofeminist Awareness	0.286	0.049	0.312	5.84	0.000**

Model Summary: $R^2 = 0.284$, $F(3,296) = 38.45$, $p < 0.001$

Ecofeminist awareness positively predicted critical thinking, while environmental degradation and gender discrimination negatively influenced it. Together, the predictors explained 28.4 percent of the variance.

Table 3: Regression Analysis Predicting Psychological Resilience

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Environmental Degradation	-0.210	0.052	-0.229	-4.04	0.000**
Gender-Based Discrimination	-0.245	0.054	-0.266	-4.54	0.000**
Ecofeminist Awareness	0.301	0.048	0.329	6.27	0.000**

Model Summary: $R^2 = 0.312$, $F(3,296) = 45.62$, $p < 0.001$

Ecofeminist awareness emerged as a strong positive predictor of psychological resilience, whereas environmental and gender stressors significantly reduced resilience.

Table 4: Regression Analysis Predicting Advocacy Intentions

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Environmental Degradation	-0.165	0.049	-0.187	-3.37	0.001
Gender-Based Discrimination	-0.198	0.051	-0.213	-3.88	0.000**
Ecofeminist Awareness	0.332	0.047	0.368	7.06	0.000**

Model Summary: $R^2 = 0.349$, $F(3,296) = 53.12$, $p < 0.001$

Ecofeminist awareness strongly predicted advocacy intentions, indicating that students with higher awareness are more likely to engage in social and environmental justice initiatives.

Findings

Interconnection between Environmental Degradation and Gender-Based Discrimination

The study revealed a significant positive relationship between perceptions of environmental degradation and experiences of gender-based discrimination among rural female college students. Students who reported higher exposure to ecological challenges also perceived greater gender inequities, illustrating the compounded vulnerabilities faced by women in rural settings. This finding confirms the presence of a “double burden”, where environmental stressors and patriarchal social structures reinforce one another.

Ecofeminist Awareness and Cognitive Outcomes

Students with higher ecofeminist awareness demonstrated stronger critical thinking abilities. Awareness of the links between gender inequality and ecological issues enhanced students’ capacity to analyze systemic social and environmental problems critically, suggesting that ecofeminist knowledge fosters reflective and evaluative thinking.

Ecofeminist Awareness and Psychological Resilience

The data indicated that students with greater ecofeminist awareness exhibited higher psychological resilience. This suggests that understanding structural inequalities and environmental challenges equips students with cognitive and emotional resources to cope with overlapping social and ecological stressors.

Ecofeminist Awareness and Advocacy Intentions

Participants with elevated ecofeminist awareness also reported stronger intentions to engage in social and environmental advocacy, indicating that knowledge of the interconnection between gender and ecological issues motivates proactive engagement in initiatives aimed at justice and sustainability.

Impact of Environmental and Gender Stressors on Mental Well-Being

Both environmental degradation and gender-based discrimination negatively affected students' mental well-being, highlighting the psychological toll of intersecting stressors. Students experiencing higher levels of environmental and gendered challenges reported increased stress, anxiety, and decreased coping capacity.

Discussion

The study's findings provide empirical support for the intersectional ecofeminist framework, emphasizing how environmental and social inequalities intersect to create compounded challenges for rural female students. The observed relationship between environmental degradation and gender-based discrimination confirms that ecological vulnerabilities and patriarchal social norms are mutually reinforcing, consistent with the perspectives of Dankelman (2010) and Arora-Jonsson (2011). Research in the Indian context similarly highlights that rural women often face heightened environmental and social hardships due to limited access to resources, education, and decision-making power (Agarwal, 1992; Shah & Pande, 2019).

A notable insight from the study is the role of ecofeminist awareness in promoting cognitive and behavioural outcomes. Students with higher ecofeminist awareness exhibited greater critical thinking, resilience, and advocacy intentions, reflecting findings from international studies indicating that eco-conscious individuals are more likely to engage in reflective problem-solving and proactive activism (Hickman et al., 2021; Arora-Jonsson, 2014). These results underscore the value of educational interventions that foster ecofeminist perspectives, equipping students to critically evaluate systemic inequalities and actively participate in addressing social and ecological injustices.

Furthermore, the study highlights the psychological implications of the double burden of environmental and gender stressors. Exposure to ecological challenges alongside gender-based discrimination negatively influenced mental well-being, mirroring the effects described in research on eco-anxiety, which links environmental stress to feelings of helplessness, distress, and heightened anxiety among youth (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020; Pihkala, 2020; Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). These findings suggest the need to integrate intersectional ecofeminist frameworks into social work education and practice, enabling students to develop resilience, advocacy skills, and critical thinking capacities that are necessary to confront and mitigate the interrelated challenges of environmental and gender injustice in rural communities.

Conclusion

The present study highlights the intertwined nature of environmental degradation and gender-based discrimination, revealing the compounded challenges often described as a "double burden" experienced by rural female college students. Findings indicate that exposure to ecological stressors, when coupled with gender inequities, negatively impacts students' mental well-being, underscoring the psychological dimension of intersecting vulnerabilities. Conversely, ecofeminist awareness was found to positively influence critical thinking, resilience, and advocacy intentions, demonstrating its role as a protective and empowering factor. These results suggest that fostering ecofeminist consciousness through educational initiatives can equip students with the skills and motivation needed to engage in socially and environmentally responsible practices. Overall, the study emphasizes the importance of integrating intersectional ecofeminist frameworks into social work education and policy-making. By doing so, educational programs and policy interventions can effectively address both gender inequities and environmental challenges in rural contexts, promoting empowerment, equity, and sustainable development.

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