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Introduction
Interconnections between economic development, environmental change, and gender politics are an important topic of analysis in feminist scholarship. Research into women’s roles in resource-based economic development and their work as environmental stewards began to emerge in the 1980s. Inspired by rural women actively resisting deforestation in the Global South, scholars theorized the relationship between people’s gender roles and identities and their attitudes toward nature. Case studies of activist struggles and iconic examples of individual ‘eco-warriors’ became valuable evidence to support new claims. Some scholars adopted an approach that celebrated women’s special connection to the earth, while others sought to analyze the material conditions and power relations that shape women’s and men’s involvement in resource use, their vulnerability to natural forces, and their eco-political agency. Nearly forty years on, debates over theoretical framing as well as over policy and practice continue to drive a vibrant research agenda that integrates several disciplines and employs diverse methodologies. The common ground is a desire to improve the living conditions of the people who are most affected by development-induced environmental change and to influence international policy making to that end.

This chapter provides an overview of gender, environment, and development scholarship that explains how early ideas and debates that have shaped subsequent work. My aim is to demonstrate how this field has evolved over time and how it has now come to understand two of the most pressing challenges of this century: climate change and disaster risk. While there remains a number of different approaches to studying gender-environment connections, in the discussion that follows I focus on feminist political ecology (FPE). FPE has evolved as a loose platform of ideas that seeks to theorize differentiated forms of power and resource access primarily but not exclusively in developing country contexts. FPE grew out of a desire to foreground the political aspects of earlier frameworks, as well as to analyze the growing neoliberalization of nature in capitalist development processes. It draws on feminist poststructuralist theory in order to criticize the domination of techno-scientific solutions to environmental change that sidestep more holistic and grounded approaches. I argue that at a time when there is a dire need to address the exigent features of climate change and disaster policy discourses, FPE offers valuable insights into human-nature relations that can contribute to more grounded analyses and better solutions. Understanding how women and men, as embodied and emotional beings, have complex and shifting relationships to the natural world that are embedded in place and shaped by intersections of gender, race, class, caste, culture, age (and so on) is central to the search for environmental and social justice. An FPE lens provides tools for envisioning transformative changes that are much needed in these troubling times.

Pioneering ideas and debates about women-gender-environment connections
The academic study of the connections between women, gender roles and relations, and the natural environment (or nature) has evolved over four decades or more. During that time, the experience and knowledge of academics, activists, and practitioners have played a significant part in the development of scholarly work. At the beginning, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, several strands of thought shaped
debates and global policy agendas. One strand was the Women, Environment and Development (WED) perspective that was closely tied to a version of ecofeminism rooted in the Global South (Shiva 1989; Mies and Shiva 1993). A second strand was a critique put forth by feminist scholars who took issue with the way the women-gender-environment connections were presented in the WED literature (Agarwal 1992a, b; Jackson 1993). It is important to summarize the debate that ensued between these positions because they arguably laid the foundations for the emergence of feminist political ecology as well as being in some ways still apparent in contemporary feminist discussions about climate change and disaster risk.

**Women, Environment and Development (WED)**

Early WED work involved compelling narratives of poor rural and indigenous women (mostly but not only in the Global South) and claims about them being among the hardest hit by - and the most active in trying to address - environmental degradation. These narratives inspired conceptual connections to be made between women and the environment. A result was the recognition that women should play a greater role in environmental programs and policies and that a strong feminist voice in global environmental politics was needed, especially in the run-up to the landmark UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. It is often noted that several of the outcome agreements of UNCED (e.g., Agenda 21) incorporated WED principles thanks to the involvement of key activists and academics in the process.1

An important figure in the development of WED, and more specifically an Indian ecofeminist approach, is the environmental scholar-activist Vandana Shiva. In her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, Shiva (1989) drew a stark contrast between the dominant forces of science, development, colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism which ‘destroy life and threaten survival’ and ‘the suffering and insights of those [women] who struggle to sustain and conserve life’ (1989:xii). To illustrate the latter she celebrated the Chipko Movement (a grassroots movement to save forests in northwest India) as a telling example of rural women’s leadership in forest and environmental preservation.2 In doing so, she invoked principles of Hinduism to argue that all pre-colonial societies ‘were based on an ontology of the feminine as the living principle (Prakriti)’ (ibid: 42). In her view, rural, indigenous women are the original givers of life and are therefore the rightful caretakers of nature. In *Staying Alive*, and later in a book co-authored with the German sociologist Maria Mies titled *Ecofeminism* (1993), Shiva suggested that Western patriarchal development (or ‘maledevelopment’) strategies and Western science have displaced the ‘feminine principle' and thus have victimized women, non-western peoples, and nature. The logical answer, for her, is to learn from ‘Third World’ women’s special knowledge, ‘they have privileged access to survival expertise’. She writes:

> Third World women are bringing the concern with living and survival back to centre stage in human history. In recovering the chances for the survival of all life, they are laying the foundations for the recovery of the feminine principle in nature and society, and through it the recovery of the earth as sustainer and provider (Shiva 1989:214-15).

Shiva’s work influenced the thinking of researchers in the Women, Environment and Development (WED) strand, but her analysis of rural women’s hands-on experience and knowledge of the natural environment was more important for them than her spiritual-culturalist ecofeminist views. It has been noted that because this body of work was largely made of up of development practitioners, it was less theoretical and more based on stories from the field than the work of academic feminists (Jackson 1993). Important for WED writers was to foreground a materialist analysis of the links between women and environment, specifically by pointing to how women’s roles brought them into close everyday contact with their environment. They subscribed to the idea that women are materially adversely affected by environmental degradation due to an *a priori*, and largely universal, gender division of labour, where women are usually disproportionately assigned caring and provisioning roles and obligations (or reproductive labour). Like Shiva’s ecofeminism, WED scholarship had an ontology centered on a feminine subject, usually a woman from the Global South who is vulnerable to environmental degradation but at the same time, ‘agency-endowed’ for the tasks of environmental care and protection (Dankelman and Davidson, 1988; Rodda, 1993; Sontheimer, 1991). It is important to note that their focus was on *women* as a group in the development process and as victims/caretakers of their environments rather than on gender as a broader category of analysis.
WED discourses were prominent throughout 1990s and 2000s in gender, livelihoods, and natural resource planning and development organizations. In policy terms, environment and development planners interpreted the feminine subject in these discourses to mean that women are the most effective targets of environment and conservation projects since their daily roles connect them closely with natural resources. As a result, gender planning specialists embraced the simplification of gendered identities, roles and interests in order to insert gender agendas into institutions that otherwise had different priorities (Cornwall et al., 2007). An unintended consequence of this planning approach was that in many cases ‘environmental care-taker’ was added to women’s already long list of caring roles. Moreover, the ‘women as environmental victims’ trope also gained political traction in international deliberations around UN conventions, since representing women as such conformed to a requirement of visible politics that needed to be created around a ‘center’ (Dirks, Eley, Ortner, et al., 1993). At the time, dissatisfaction with this translation of WED thinking into policy ran in parallel with similar critiques levelled at Women in Development (WID) perspectives, which saw women as a stand-alone homogeneous group with a set of static and pre-defined roles.

**Critiques of WED**

Intellectual unease with the prominence of a simplified and centred feminine subject in WED and ecofeminist policy discourses spurred new directions in understanding the connections between gender and environment. Criticisms of both WID and WED came from feminist academics working in the development field. For example, Brinda Rao (1991) argued that instead of accepting a priori perceptions of feminine roles, there is a need to contextualize women as they respond to complex environmental realities and to consider how they enter into and engage in social relationships with men within the institutions of their natural resource-dependent societies. An early proponent of a critical gender analysis in unpacking environmental relations, Cecile Jackson (1993a, b) proposed that analysis should focus on power relations between women and men, and that women be treated as a disaggregated group of subjects as gender roles are socially and historically constructed and continually reformulated. Importantly, Jackson challenged the idea of ‘women’ as a natural constituency for environmental projects, underscoring the contingent nature and fluidity of gender interests.

One scholar who is perhaps most associated with the early critique of ecofeminism and the WED approach, and who has played a significant part in the evolution of gender and environment scholarship, is the Indian feminist economist Bina Agarwal. In a widely-cited 1992 article ‘The gender and environment debate: lessons from India’, Agarwal offered both a critique of ecofeminism and an alternative to it, which she called ‘feminist environmentalism’. She was particularly critical of cultural ecofeminists (such as Sherry Ortner, Ynestra King, and Ariel Salleh) who, in her assessment, were viewing women’s relationship to nature through an ideological Western feminist lens and failing to understand the diversity of women’s experiences and the complex material realities of their interactions with the natural world. Although she argued that Vandana Shiva’s work ‘takes us further than the Western ecofeminists in exploring the links’ between development processes and their impacts on people, livelihoods and environments, Agarwal also identified a number of similar shortcomings in Shiva’s analysis (1992:124). First, Shiva did not differentiate between Third world women of ‘different classes, castes, races, ecological zones and so on’ (ibid:125). This homogenization of women, Agarwal suggested, was a form of essentialism and she regarded as questionable the claim that women qua women are ‘embedded in nature’ and having a ‘special’ relationship with the natural environment (ibid:125). Second, she criticized Shiva’s use of the Hindu feminine principle as if it applied to all Indian women when in fact it is a very specific interpretation of a pluralistic religion that not all Indians practice. A third shortcoming, according to Agarwal, was that Shiva presented women and nature’s oppression in the Third World as ‘almost entirely’ caused by colonial and patriarchal forms of development, which was in fact a simplification of a complex history of that includes the ‘very real local forces of power, privilege and property relations that pre-date colonialism’(ibid:126).

In response to these criticisms, Agarwal advocated an alternative position, which she called ‘feminist environmentalism’, that would be both rigorous and transformational. It would take a materialist analytical approach that sees gender and class as intrinsically linked. It would be based on the view that women’s
specific forms of interaction with the environment are socially constructed: structured by gender, class and caste divisions of labour and property. These divisions in turn shape their experiences of environmental change and their knowledge of and responses to environmental degradation. In Agarwal’s words, her alternative perspective:

…would call for struggles over both resources and meanings. It would imply grappling with the dominant groups who have the property, power, and privilege to control resources, and these or other groups who control ways of thinking about them, via educational, media, religious, and legal institutions. On the feminist front there would be a need to challenge and transform both notions about gender and the actual division of work and resources between the genders. On the environmental front there would be a need to challenge and transform not only notions about the relationship between people and nature but also the actual methods of appropriation of nature's resources by a few. Feminist environmentalism underlines the necessity of addressing these dimensions from both fronts (ibid:127).

Agarwal’s critique of the essentializing and single-axis approach found in early ecofeminist work was rooted in her in depth, empirical research in India. The ‘lessons from India’ that informed her analysis were that it makes no sense to think of women as a unitary category; that environmental degradation and the appropriation of land and resources by the powerful affect poor women the most and result in the loss of their livelihood and knowledge systems; that there is a complex interplay of ideology, power, and inequality behind the destruction of environments and livelihoods; and that it is important to observe and to hear the messages of women and men involved in grassroots resistance the processes, products, people, property, power, and profit-orientation that underlie social inequality and environmental destruction (1992:150).

Importantly, Agawal’s critique, her analytical and methodological approach - and her lessons from India - have provided a model for subsequent research in the gender and environment field. It is apparent from a thorough review of the academic literature that ideologically-driven portraits of women’s connections to nature are now extremely rare in academic gender and environment research. In fact, the body of research that has been developed under the label of feminist political ecology offers a rich array of local case studies from all regions of the globe that continue to challenge any notions that women as women should be seen as either environmental victims or saviours. It is to this body of work that I now turn.

**The evolution of feminist political ecology**

Feminist political ecology (FPE) emerged on the scene in the mid-1990s, arguably as way to re-claim the feminist politics in environmental engagements and to redress the negative, essentialist reputation of cultural forms of ecofeminism. Whether or not (and how) FPE is connected to ecofeminism or whether it is a rejection of ecofeminist scholarship is beyond the scope of this chapter (see Rocheleau and Nimal 2015). The discussion in this section offers an overview of its evolution and central themes and concepts.

To begin, no discussion of FPE is ever complete without meandering momentarily into political ecology itself, like a river artery to its source, as FPE is a subfield of political ecology and both evolved in intellectually integrated and similar ways. Political ecology (PE) is an analytical approach that interrogates the operations of power that define people’s unequal and differentiated access and control of resources at local, regional, and global scales. It came to the forefront of human geography in the 1980s, bringing political analysis to the task of understanding the links between environment and society. PE scholars argue that there is no transcendent adaptive or ecological order that can one-sidedly affect human populations, but an ecological system in which capital commodifies and commercializes every aspect of nature and re-configures human communities (Watts, 2015; Peet, Robbins, and Watts, 2011). From its inception, PE scholarship has made deliberate efforts to express how nature and society are understood to co-produce one another, referred to as “socio-natures” (Castree and Braun, 2001). For example, for people involved in environmental justice movements, Loftus (2012: x) says ‘the environment is something lived as a simultaneously bodily and global process’. He draws attention to shack dwellers’ struggles to secure water as a political effort that mediates socio-nature relationships, employing the view of ‘assemblages’ of nature and society that are co-produced and co-evolutionary. By placing the operations of power on the analytical center stage, political ecology utilizes the theoretical lenses of political economy, human agency, material
nature and discourse, conflict and competition, governmentality and the creation of environmental subjects (Peet, et al., 2011).

FPE emerged from political ecology’s concern for social equity and social justice issues in environmental change, and draws from the intrinsically political character and analytical foci of feminism: power and difference. It was first proposed as a new conceptual framework by Dianne Rocheleau, Barbara Thomas-Slayer and Esther Wangari in their landmark 1996 book Feminist Political Ecology: Global Issues and Local Experiences. They presented it as a sub-field of political ecology that recognizes gendered power relations as a “critical variable in shaping resource access and control interacting with class, caste, race, culture, and ethnicity to shape processes of ecological change” (1996:4). In addition to characterizing it as a framework for bringing ‘a feminist perspective to political ecology’ (ibid), they explain that it draws on insights from feminist cultural ecology, feminist geography, and feminist political economy. The framework enables a multi-scalar analysis of knowledge production, gendered rights and responsibilities, and more pointedly, the workings of power and politics in the use, access and distribution of resources in the context of neoliberal economic growth and structural adjustment trajectories.

Also centrally important is a focus on gendered environmental politics and grassroots activism. In contrast to the WED approach, which tended to concentrate on how to help women hurt by the vagaries of environmental destruction, FPE was built a decade’s worth of insights from women’s involvement in local environmental struggles and social movement organizing in all parts of the world, in the South as well as in the North. Notable examples from that time were the Love Canal New York Homeowners’ Association, the Kenyan Greenbelt Movement, the Indian Chipko Movement, the anti-toxics campaigns in Cancer Alley (Warren County, North Carolina) and the global Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO). Case studies of women’s involvement in collective action formed the main content of Feminist Political Ecology, thereby establishing the importance of case study and narrative research to the FPE approach. Informed by Rocheleau et al’s core themes, scholarly work in FPE has since gathered a plethora of qualitative data on gendered experiences and has taken up a range of issues from the workings of gender in contested rights to farms and forests (Schroeder, 1999; Cranney, 2001; Paulson and Gezon, 2005), to struggles over water (Harris, 2006; Udas and Zwarteveen, 2010), and the changing politics of fisheries (Bavington et al., 2004).

FPE is not a bounded or non-porous framework of ideas and analytical approaches, but rather a living, evolving platform of ideas that draws from the rich history of feminist theory. From its inception in the 1990s, when it aimed to highlight the materiality of women’s political struggles around resources and rights (Moeckli and Braun, 2001), FPE has in recent years assumed strong post-structuralist leanings that question received wisdoms on the production of gender and other identities. It also brings the staunchly critical reading of the workings of power – neoliberal, androcentric, colonial and environmental injustices – to constantly new levels of analyses. More than twenty years after the publication of Feminist Political Ecology Rocheleau tells us that:

FPE is more about a feminist perspective and an ongoing exploration and construction of a network of learners than a fixed approach for a single focus on women and/or gender. This constant circulation of theory, practice, policies and politics, and the mixing of various combinations of gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, ontologies and ecologies, with critique of colonial legacies and neoliberal designs, has characterized many feminist political ecologists. It is a work in process . . . (2015: 57)

Informed by post-structuralist insights, FPE work in the 2010s offers critical perspectives in a growing context of climate change, disasters, and large-scale investments following neo-liberal economic growth orientations (see for example Nightingale, 2006; Harris, 2006; Elmhirst, 2011; Hawkins and Ojeda, 2011; Carney, 2014; Buechler and Hanson, 2015; Harcourt and Nelson, 2015; Leach, 2015; Rocheleau and Nirmal, 2015; Sundberg, 2017). Economic reform programs that favor accumulation-driven and neoliberal approaches to natural resource management have widened transnationally and deepened its influence in national states’ economic growth trajectories. These have led to new exclusions and vulnerabilities,
stimulating the creation of platforms for social and environmental justice struggles, and a fresh advocacy of sustainable development. The processes causing the intensification of environmental degradation and climate change (non-renewable energy markets and fossil fuel dependence, deforestation, desertification, and urbanization on massive scales) have led to more frequent stresses, shocks, and disasters that affect lives and livelihoods, often re-configuring communities in gendered and socially differentiated ways. In turn, solutions for mitigating these stresses – such as for example the emergence of the green economy (the carbon trade, conservation enclosures, bio-energy development, payment for ecosystem services) – pose difficult questions regarding trade-offs between environmental sustainability and social well-being. In these emerging contexts, FPE focuses on complex dimensions of gendered and social experiences of loss, disadvantage, dispossession, and displacement within the multiple ecologies in which human beings are embedded.

This focus on multi-dimensional experiences marks out FPE’s concern for, first of all, an intersectional analysis of society-environment relations and multi-dimensional gender subjectivities that does not disentangle gender from race, ethnicity, class and disability and other social categories. Intersectionality is an explicit rejection of single-axis analyses (May, 2014). Second, FPE recognizes the importance of conducting ‘science from below’ or examining people’s embodied experiences of resource degradation, disasters, and displacements, or dispossession as these connect with other scales of power and decision-making (Harding, 2008; Hanson, 2015). And third, FPE interrogates knowledge production, governance and policy making, as they herald new forms of intervention and environmental governance that may be shaped by assumptions that deepen differentiated and unjust life opportunities and exclusions. These themes in FPE are elaborated in the sections that follow.

A feminist political ecology of climate change and disaster risk: going beyond the vulnerable feminine subject

Interdisciplinary social science research into the politics of climate change and disaster risks is gaining traction today for obvious reasons. It is not necessary to give an explanation of the most significant environmental issue that frames contemporary politics, policy, and academic research: as is reported almost daily in news media, climatic changes brought on by centuries of capitalist development driven by fossil fuels are causing disasters (e.g. extreme weather events such as floods, droughts, storms) and pose severe risks of such disasters in most parts of the globe in future years. In the face of exigent action and response to disasters, what often goes unquestioned is the identity of the ‘disaster victim.’

An important idea that was crystallized quite early by disaster scholars is that disasters put gender and other forms of social inequality into stark relief (Wisner et al., 2004; Bankoff et al., 2004). Popular gender, climate change and disaster discourses today revolve around a centered feminine subject – that is, the poor rural woman of the South – who is negatively affected by climate change. A running logic permeates the discussions: climate change is most adversely felt by vulnerable people in the climate hotspots of the South, and chief among them are women, who constitute the larger percentage of the world’s poorest. Marshalling quantitative evidence, such as the often cited work of Neumayer & Plümper (2007) on disaster impacts on women, serve to make the case for including gender in the climate change and disaster agendas at international and local levels of deliberation. This same thinking argues that women are powerful agents of change and that their full participation is critical to the success of adaptation and mitigation programs, and hence, it is important that women and gender experts participate in all decisions related to climate change (GenderCC-Women for Climate Justice, 2008). Denton (2002) further remarks that threats resulting from global warming have failed to draw attention to the importance of placing women at the center: ‘poor women are generally on the receiving end of the effects of increasing environmental degradation and depletion of natural resources, because of their involvement in, and reliance on, livelihoods activities which depend directly on the natural environment’ (Denton, 2002:12). Policy makers, and to some extent, women’s organizations, invoke the flip side of women-as-victims – i.e., women-as-agents – with special capacities to adapt, build resilience, or mitigate the effects of degradation or stresses in their homes and communities. This construct translates into treating women as a labour constituency with assigned disaster risk management and climate adaptation tasks that may serve to add to their already long list of caring roles. The discourse of women as chief victim-and-caretaker in climate change debates and programmes thus
resonates with the WED ontology of the centered feminine subject who is pre-disposed with specific caring roles (Resurrección, 2013).

As an early counterpoint to these WED-oriented framings of women in disaster and climate change contexts described above, gender and disasters scholar Elaine Enarson (1998) defined a more complex ontological approach that chimes well with contemporary FPE. She warned that gendered vulnerability to disasters and climate risk does not derive from a single factor such as ‘being a woman’, but instead vulnerability indicates historically and culturally specific patterns of practices, processes and power relations that render some groups or persons more disadvantaged than others. Enarson’s work also takes the view of other scholars on social vulnerability, arguing that vulnerability is an intrinsically differentiating process, a dynamic condition shaped by existing and emerging inequalities in resource distribution and access, the control individuals exert over choices and opportunities, and historical patterns of social domination and marginalisation (Eakin and Luers, 2006; Bankoff, et al., 2004; Wisner et al., 2004 in Enarson, 2012). Through such framing, it is possible to understand how people come to be gendered, disciplined and regulated as women or men – and as a result, differentially vulnerable – under varying conditions of climate change stresses and disaster risks. Additionally, Nightingale (2009) argues that vulnerability does not stem solely from a set of intrinsically or fixed vulnerable characteristics, but that attention should instead shift to the kinds of climate-related hardships that will result for specific kinds of people (specific classes and ethnic groups of women and men) due to their different political, economic and social positions and their uneven power relations. This challenges tendencies to rely on typologies of vulnerable groups often used in disaster management.

Enarson and Nightingale’s early contributions to the gender, climate change and disaster literature echoes FPE’s view that social subjectivities are shaped through, and reflect, differential access to and control over nature, and the experiences of disasters and climate change. This chimes well with FPE’s position on the production of gender: subjectivities are dynamic and in process, contingent and intersectional. They depart from the essentialist feminine subject.

In more recent gender, climate change and disaster studies, scholars such as Hyndman (2008), Cupples (2007), and Arora-Jonsson (2011) challenge the tendency to essentialize women’s vulnerability to disasters. They emphasize the need to recognize the historical and embodied contexts of women’s and men’s lives prior to a disaster, which could in large part explain the differentiated vulnerable positions among types of women and men in the wake of a disaster that do not easily fit into the singular and undifferentiated category of ‘disaster victim’ in popular discourse (Enarson and Chakrabarti, 2009; Bradshaw, 2015; Huynh and Resurreccion, 2014; Resurreccion and Sajor, 2015). These ideas also chime with political ecology’s growing concern with “socio-natures” (Swyngedouw, 1999; Castree and Braun, 2001), where disasters and disaster identities are viewed as being socially, politically, and biophysically co-produced, but additionally as Cupples (2007) in post-structuralist gender and disaster studies argues, subjectivities are also performed, materialized and reworked through both extreme and slow-onset disasters.

These ideas draw from the work of Judith Butler (1994) as she describes the production of gender as ontologically producing a particular understanding of gender into a ‘fact’, a repetitive exercise of materializing what is named. Within FPE, scholars similarly draw from feminist post-structural theory to frame the gendered political ecology subject (see Sundberg, 2004; Harris, 2006; Nightingale, 2006; Elmhirst 2011). No pre-given identities exist, rather, identities are dynamically forged through everyday power-laden practices and discourses in specific ecological contexts. The framing of disasters by aid, disaster and humanitarian specialists, for example, may tend to define particular identities, such as victims, survivors, dependents, survivors, and aid workers. Those left out of the frame may not receive immediate emergency assistance from humanitarian organizations. Emergency response almost always target ‘women and children’ first, as men are left to fend for themselves which in some contexts have led to more male than female fatalities, such as in Nicaragua and Honduras in the wake of Hurricane Mitch in 2000 (Correia, 2001).

In a post-disaster context, Hyndman (2008) demonstrates complexity by describing how different social practices throughout two disasters (the Tamil-Sinhalese war and later, the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004) produced subjectivities through the intersections of gender, ethnicity and religion. The result was a complex mosaic of performed identities of widows with differentiated gendered and cultural rights and restrictions. War widows affected by the tsunami had very little remaining relations of support since many of their relatives were wiped out by the tsunami; they ‘lost everything in one day’ and thus sought to remarry.
Widows of war still relied on many surviving kinship networks and thus did not remarry. Sinhala women and widows were more economically and socially advantaged compared with Tamil and Muslim widows whose mobility is culturally controlled, and who have fewer employment opportunities. Their embodied experiences of loss, cultural restrictions and obligations, and their level of access to economic resources shaped the widows’ capacities to fully or only partially recover from disasters. Recovery and resilience-building efforts often gloss over the specific needs of disaster-affected women that arise from these experiences and performed intersectional identities in disaster contexts.

**From impacts to embodied knowledge, emotions, and belonging**

As discussed above, international gender and climate change debates largely focus on the impacts of climate change and disasters on women, who are often understood as a specifically vulnerable group. “The notion that women are most vulnerable victims of climate change and its impacts is what makes many [climate change] negotiators receptive to women and gender aspects” (Röhr, 2009: 59 in Arora-Jonsson, 2010: 747; clauses mine). The single-axis identity of the ‘climate-vulnerable woman’ is marshalled to legitimize gender mainstreaming in climate change-related activities. “Gender” is therefore rarely mentioned in official climate change discourses except when impacts count women as climate victims or as mothers who defend families and household livelihoods (for a critique see MacGregor, 2006; MacGregor, 2010; Rocheleau and Nirmal, 2015; Tuana, 2013). This can potentially forge dangerous liaisons with positivist and neoliberal managerial approaches that privilege material and measurable impacts to justify interventions and policy change. Climate change and disasters, as result, can be ‘reduced’, ‘managed’ or ‘mitigated’ through technical means and as scholars caution, in ways that are de-politicized, masculinized, and scientized (Tschakert, 2012; MacGregor, 2010). This approach in many ways creates persistent silences around the political economic causes of climate change, disasters and the disadvantage and disempowerment that they exacerbate.

It may be instructive to view the managerial and techno-scientific approaches to climate change that are adopted by the UN and national governments through the lens of feminist critiques of science, where objectivity and value-free knowledge as the goals of scientific inquiry have been questioned. For example, the works of Sandra Harding (1986) and Donna Haraway (1988) challenge the dominant assumption that scientists and decision-makers are separate from their bodies, social position and locations, where objective truth and science arrive as the ‘view from nowhere.’ Tuana (2013) points to the feminist search for a ‘successor science’ that rightfully coexists with others. “Gender” is therefore rarely mentioned in official climate change discourses except when impacts count women as climate victims or as mothers who defend families and household livelihoods (for a critique see MacGregor, 2006; MacGregor, 2010; Rocheleau and Nirmal, 2015; Tuana, 2013). This can potentially forge dangerous liaisons with positivist and neoliberal managerial approaches that privilege material and measurable impacts to justify interventions and policy change. Climate change and disasters, as result, can be ‘reduced’, ‘managed’ or ‘mitigated’ through technical means and as scholars caution, in ways that are de-politicized, masculinized, and scientized (Tschakert, 2012; MacGregor, 2010). This approach in many ways creates persistent silences around the political economic causes of climate change, disasters and the disadvantage and disempowerment that they exacerbate.

In their book *Practicing Feminist Political Ecologies* Wendy Harcourt, Leila Harris and Julie Nelson (2015) plead for a practice of theorizing ‘from where we are’. By this, they mean the need to theorize from the everyday, embodied and affective lives in order to articulate alternatives to neoliberalism, and to serve as correctives to governance scales and priorities that singularly focus on statist or global/transnational interests. These articulations complement Rocheleau’s (2011) study in the Dominican Republic that demonstrates how networked and rooted assemblages of resources, animals, landscape features, technologies, institutions and human beings help us to see embedded, uneven, and dynamic relations of power in everyday life. This analysis applies equally to disaster and climate change contexts.

People’s experiences of disasters and extreme or slow-onset climatic changes are themselves meaning-making events. People make sense of their present and future life trajectories as they embody these events, often in emotional terms. Emotions are therefore part of the conscious and unconscious fabric of human action, reaction, and sense- and meaning-making when confronted with changes wrought by disaster, environmental and climate change. During the Bangkok flood in 2011, for example, I interviewed 12 female residents in a northern peri-urban province near Bangkok whose homes were damaged, and who
involuntarily moved to safer places, anxiously returning home at a later time.⁶ Their stories revealed that emotions about home unpack how the women lived through their disaster experience, as these same emotions shaped their eventual return home amid the risks of further damage and loss. For the women the flood triggered emotions that were tied to the destruction of their homes and personal possessions. It unsettled their sense of self and place, building fears and anxieties over possible loss of refuge, stable social networks, and ultimately, their identity. Once away from home, flood-displaced women I spoke to expressed that they struggled to re-acquire some cohesive sense of self as they lived temporarily in an alien distant place with relatives. They sought stability in gender roles by taking up gendered activities such as maternal care for their hosts, while keeping a watch on floodwater levels from a distance, activities normally expected of men. The displaced residents returned to their flooded homes a few weeks after they left. This example shows that the notion of home by itself becomes fixed in emotions and in the imagination as ‘something that must be returned to’ and re-claimed as part of intimate embodied space and sense of self (Morrice, 2012).

Lingering and slow onset climate changes that deteriorate landscapes and livelihoods have also elicited emotions of growing loss and hopelessness, gradually eroding people’s sense of place and belonging. Feminist political ecologist Petra Tschakert and her colleagues (2013) studied people from northern Ghana, some of whom remain in their home lands and others who have left for Accra, the capital. Their study draws attention to the subtle convergence of environmental and social decay in the face of altered landscapes, growing dissatisfaction with life, weak state intervention, and dwindling social networks. Climate change was only one among several reasons why some chose to leave, a decision that simmered for a long time in their minds, as they witnessed the slow and gradual loss of livelihood options. Those left behind struggle to survive and hold on to their sense of place. The study adopts a grounded and slightly de-centered approach to researching climate change impacts that emphasizes the embodied experiences and place-based manifestations of global and local conditions through landscapes of everyday life. Such a conceptualization of the embodied experiences of climate change could counter-weigh dominant managerial approaches that focus on uni-dimensional impacts requiring mitigation. Similarly, this example also shows that through the prism of emotions and embodied experiences, people agonizingly resist being ‘dis-placed,’ thus profoundly challenging growing national security discourses that build spectres of climate change-induced mass migrations. An FPE lens can therefore potentially expose mismatches between people’s everyday embodied realities and institutional programs and practices. This also resonates with the rich tradition of FPE and the pioneering work of Rocheleau et al (1996) to chronicle struggles of women for survival, voice and collective action as they live under risky and degrading environmental conditions, which are outcomes of political economic and ecological power dynamics at multiple scales.

Conclusion
Some feminists and gender advocates working in the environment and development field continue to define gender, climate change, and disaster agendas in such a way that women are portrayed as victims but with special capabilities and knowledge to enable them to mitigate shocks and stresses. While important in some respects, this approach inadvertently plays into the growing techno-managerial approaches of risk reduction programs, as I have explained. It also sustains the WED-oriented and ecofeminist single-axis and essentialist orientation for which criticism has been leveled since the 1990s. I argue that the strength of feminist political ecology lies in its possibilities for feminist engagements in ecopolitics without avoiding the workings of power or relying on ‘essences’ that assume pre-given gender identities and a natural order outside history. FPE frees us to understand that ‘nature’ as we know it, has become increasingly produced by human activities, and which therefore can be re-examined and put in check. It envisions a better world that is socially and environmentally just and free of fossil fuel dependence controlled by big business players. FPE offers nuanced, grounded and situated research and understandings of emotions and embodied knowing that avoids the shortcomings of universalism and the grand narratives of neoliberal growth and scientific truth.

I have shown in this chapter that there is a growing body of promising work in the field of FPE that uses interdisciplinary theorizing and the analysis of specific case studies that show the ways gender identities and social difference are socially constituted through struggles and embodied experiences of environment, disasters and climate change. FPE can potentially build on current efforts to explore and enact diverse and
Fair economies (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013); inspire alternative feminist ethics of care in environment and disaster contexts (Jarosz, 2011; Lawson, 2007; Whittle et al., 2012), and mitigate the effects of climate change through just and collaborative action in communities (Buechler and Hanson, 2015). Solutions and pathways are multiple, as FPE recognizes that there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ solutions. And these initiatives help bolster hopes that there is potential for forming coalitions and alliances both transnationally and within national boundaries.

References


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1 Notably in the following agreements: Agenda 21, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (1993), and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (1994). There were no explicit provisions in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (1995).
Both factual and conceptual assumptions about the Chipko Movement have been called into question by, among others, the contributors to a special collection of journal papers in the *Journal of Peasant Studies* (Vol. 25, No. 4, 1998).

From the wider field of development policy studies, we are reminded by Lewis and Mosse (2006) that planning exercises have the propensity to mobilize simplifications of policy and politics. Political simplifications, however, are incapable of addressing the complex problems on the ground. It therefore seems far less cumbersome and ‘politically acceptable’ for planners to relate to the idea of ‘women as victims,’ and thereby view them as agents of positive environmental action, than to address the complex drivers of gendered relations of power within which they are embedded in the first place.

Earlier iterations of FPE shared ecofeminism’s tendency to bringing women’s knowledges into environmental decision-making and highlighted the role of women’s collective activism around environmental issues (Moeckli and Braun, 2001).

Peet et al. (2011) pre-dated the UNFCCC COP21 Agreement in their critical assessment of global climate governance as focused largely on emissions counting that obscures and de-politicizes the emissions-producing practices that drive neoliberal economic growth.

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