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Forty years of gender research and environmental policy: Where do we stand? ☆

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SYNOPSIS

Forty years of gender research has ensured that gender is an important category that needs to be taken into account in environmental policy and practice. A great deal of finances and attention are currently being directed to gender in development and environmental organizations. At the same time, as gender research has become more sophisticated and theoretically strong, there is also frustration among academic researchers as well as practitioners and policy makers that it appears to have had a marginal effect on environmental practice on the ground.

Policies have turned to gender mainstreaming, attempted to include women and other marginalized social groups in environmental management and markets. Change has been mixed. Mainstreaming can become a technocratic exercise. The assumption that competing interests can be negotiated by adding women to organizations for environmental governance, in disregard for social relations, is problematic. Stereo-types about women and men, sometimes buttressed by gender research predominate in policy and programs. Inclusion in markets offer new options but can further curb women's agency. Contradictions arise - as gender becomes a part of the official machinery, when women are regarded as a collective but addressed as individuals in programs and when the focus is on the governance of gender with little attention on the gender of neoliberal governance. Yet, support for 'gender programs' has also led to unintended openings for empowerment. It is clear that the meaning of gender is far from settled and there are intensified efforts to define what 'gender' is in each context. I discuss the renewed interest in gender and what this engagement with power might mean for gender research, policy and practice and where we might go from here.

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Forty years of gender research and environmental policy: where do we stand?

There is a resurgent anxiety about gendered concerns in environmental policy-making today. Ministries of Environment in Europe, some for the first time, are producing reports on how to go about gender mainstreaming (e.g. [Regeringskansliet, 2011](#)), the CGIAR (the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research) has pledged a great deal of funding for gender strategies, the World Bank's World Development Report 2012 was on Gender Equality. Investment banks such as

Goldman-Sachs have launched a project, *10,000 Women* with the slogan, 'Investing in Women.'¹ On closer inspection though, environmental practice appears to be moving in an opposite direction. The focus on global governance and the predominance of climate change debates with technical discussions on the environment and complicated carbon calculations have pushed out ordinary people and especially gendered concerns from environmental questions. Contrary to the 1990s when questions of participation and decentralization occupied environmental studies and policy, discussions have now moved to high level meetings between governments, international organizations, companies and scientists' laboratories especially in relation to climate change. In the midst of this, the talk about gender at international and national arenas seems out of place. Why gender? And why now?

☆ Forthcoming 2014, in the special issue on Social Policy in *Women's Studies International Forum*.

Prescriptions to pay heed to gender in environmental issues has laid bare an associated inconsistency. As gender research has become more sophisticated and theoretically strong, there is also frustration among academic researchers as well as practitioners and policy makers that it appears to have had a marginal effect on environmental practice on the ground. Scholars feel that their work is rarely taken up in policy while practitioners complain that gender theorizations are far removed from their practical work of negotiating gender relations in environmental and development interventions. Gender research has given us precise concepts to understand society but the link between research and every day work appears to be more elusive. Although mostly on the margins of environmental policy and development from the 1970s to the present, 'gender' has nonetheless become institutionalized in the field of environment studies and policy. Most researchers and policy makers working within the fields of environment and development have an opinion on what it is and why or why it may not be relevant to their work.

In this article, I examine gender and environment debates within the academy in relation to shifts in the policy and practice of environmental work over the past forty years. In doing so, I help explain its current resurgence in policy and its absence on the ground and provide indications for the future. Tensions over 'gender' lie at the heart of the many contradictions. 'Gender' in environmental policy, especially in its early days and for the most part even now has been shorthand for 'women.' 'Gender' gained ground in the 1970s in environmental policy and practice when scholars and others first brought up questions of women's unequal positions *vis a vis* development and environmental interventions and focused attention on the critical roles women play in environmental management on the ground. Since then, researchers have used gender as an analytic category to probe how power relations organize all systems and interventions and how gender relations are implicit in environmental outcomes. Drawing on the work of a range of scholars (e.g. Scott, 1988; Butler, 1990; Haraway, 1991), gender and environment researchers have worked hard to clarify that gender is an analysis of power relationships and the practices through which what is a 'man' or 'woman' get defined and made to appear as natural in different environmental contexts.

As opposed to social policy, environmental policy has conventionally been about the biophysical world and not necessarily about people. Yet as policy makers especially in the global South have come to acknowledge, the social and political are linked inextricably to the biophysical and impossible to separate on the ground. The intersection of development and environmental policy making has been difficult to avoid. More recently, there has been a corresponding acknowledgement of gender issues in environmental policy-making in countries in the North especially in Europe. Although there are vast differences in each national context, whether in the global North or South, the aim of this article is to provide broad brush strokes of global trends in environmental policy-making *vis a vis* gender. Gender research has had an important role to play in these developments. As is evident in the following pages, most of the literature on gender and environment has its basis in countries in the South although there is now a growing literature on the North.

This is not a comprehensive review of all the literature in the field of gender and environmental studies and nor of policy initiatives over time. Here, I emphasize some insights on gender and environment that I believe have been important in these overlapping spheres and use my research experiences and the work of scholars (among many others) as I examine some major strands in research. I analyze the uptake of some gender research in policy, effects on the ground and indications for the future. I begin with asking: 1) What can we claim to know after 40 years of gender research and how has some of the early gender research been put into practice especially in environmental policy 2) What has moved on, what appears to be standing still and what effects has such gender research had in policy and practice? 3) Where are we today and what might this mean for the future of gender research *vis a vis* policy and practice?

It becomes clear that what 'gender' in 'environments' entails is not a settled issue and is riven with tensions: by the expectation that gender research needs to present stable categories that policy and practitioners can work with, by tensions over collective change *versus* personal empowerment, by feminist compromises over the use of gender in policy and practice and most importantly over the struggles to settle and define what gender is.

Gender and environment: some insights/what can we claim to know today and its relation to policy

Roughly from the time of Ester Boserup's work on women and economic development (1970) to postmodern and postcolonial research, scholars, activists and development workers have been exploring the nexus between gender, environment and sustainable development. The genealogy of gender and environment debates (ecofeminism, Women in Development – WID, Environment and Development – WED, Gender and Development – GAD) are fairly well documented and I am not going through them here.² Instead I bring together insights from 40 years of varied, rich and often contradictory gender research in relation to environments. The aspects that surfaced as important are the 1) decentering of the male subject of environmental policy, through paying greater attention to women and other marginalized social groups in development and environmental initiatives and the understanding that environments mean different things to different groups of people 2) the importance of property rights and economic security and a recognition of women's unpaid labor in caring and environmental work 3) arguments for the inclusion of women in decision-making and formal environmental governance 4) the transformative potential of gendered struggles for emancipation but also the ambiguities in support for them from outside agencies.

Bringing women into focus: decentering the subject of environmental management and policy

Early scholars working on gender and environment in the 1980s showed how women and men often fare differently due to their work, their differing roles, status and relation to their environments. Their research brought attention to women's work that was unacknowledged and made invisible in mainstream studies on the environment. Several

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