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FROM THE NEED OF “EQUITY” TO THE EVIDENCE OF “DIFFERENCE”

Contributions of gender perspectives to the
governance of the environment



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Author's biographical note

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Note

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PREFACE

The present paper synthesises main ideas developed through a research project called “Environmental Governance from a Gender Perspective. Theoretical Approaches and Case Study Analysis”. The study was carried out from 2003 until 2006 at the Knowledge Assessment Methodologies Sector (KAM, <http://alba.jrc.it>) of the European Commissions’ Joint Research Centre in Ispra (Italy).

Our principle aim is to offer a comprehensive view of the way gender studies may stimulate the reflection on environmental governance processes and enrich them, by promoting specific scientific approaches and methodologies to the study of environmental issues, based on a cross-cutting critical view on science, society and politics.

The paper deals with two different approaches to gender theory: “equity” and “difference”. It analyses in which way each of these positions leads to valuable contributions to the issue of environmental governance. Whereas “gender equity” has been taken up rather smoothly by political institutions, the specific focus on “gender difference” has received less attention. Nevertheless, both of them bring relevant insights which help interpreting the complexity of gender inequities. The study’s purpose is not to present these gender studies’ approaches as two different alternatives, but to show their complementarity. Together, they can enhance our understanding of the links between gender, environment and political decision making. Starting from these two above-mentioned perspectives the paper addresses three thematic areas considered as critical in the introduction of a gender approach to environment-related governance: gender perspectives on

environmental issues, feminist views on science, and gender assessment of participatory processes.

We expect that our contribution increases insight in the issue of gender and environmental governance, and that it helps disseminating gender studies' perspectives amongst researchers, policy-makers and the civil society in general.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Environmental governance practices are largely gender-blind. Consequently, women are underrepresented in the discussion and the decision-making process and gender related issues are ignored. Furthermore, when gender is addressed it is often in a narrow and reductive way. As such, the diversity of contributions that could arrive from gender studies is not considered.

The paper's starting point is empirical evidence of gender unequal representation and biases in participatory policy-making processes as shown by a quantitative and qualitative assessment of Local Agenda 21. Based on these empirical data, it focuses on the potential benefits of the introduction of gender perspectives on environmental governance practices, reflecting on two main approaches: "equity" and "difference".

In its "equity" form, gender studies assess social fairness of environmental problems and conflicts, and of political problem-solving initiatives. They show that men and women may be exposed to and influence the degradation of the environment in different ways. They help to identify population at risk because of environmental problems. They also show that the under-representation of women in environment-related political decision making may lead to unexpected side effects on females and to increased gender inequities.

Nevertheless, an exclusive focus on equity may not be sufficient to address the complexity of gender and environmental issues. This approach may be complemented by contributions coming from the "difference" perspective.

In its "difference" form, gender contributions point to gender tendencies in citizens' values, interests and views on the environment. The argument that

gender shapes our concerns for the environment opens challenging reflections for the improvement of participatory decision making processes.

Science feminists have discussed gender biases in science production. These biases relate to the scientific framing of problems, the definition, collection and analysis of data, and to the epistemological and methodological roots of the research. Feminist theory has also brought diverse arguments to sustain that women's active involvement in the scientific community makes a difference in the production of knowledge.

Last but not least, the "difference" approach of gender studies brings relevant insights to the assessment of participatory processes. It is doubtful whether a male and female balance in representation is enough to reach gender equity in participatory decision-making, if traditional gender inequities in public environments are not addressed. Socioeconomic inequalities impact women's power to participate. Gendered socio-cultural patterns implicitly rule policy-related arenas. Both these barriers need to be considered when aiming at empowering women's voices in environmental decision-making.

The paper concludes by summarising a list of "contributions of gender perspectives to participatory processes embedded in environmental governance".

Keywords: gender, women, governance, environment, research, decision-making, participation, Ecofeminism, gender equity, gender difference.

FROM THE NEED OF “EQUITY” TO THE EVIDENCE OF “DIFFERENCE”

Contributions of Gender Perspectives to the Governance of the Environment

Gender in mainstream environmental governance practices. The case of LA21

A reference document promoting the introduction of gender to environmental politics is Agenda 21. The report proposes objectives and activities for enhancing gender equity through sustainable development¹ (UN, 1992). Governments are encouraged to advance the position of women in decision making and techno-scientific structures and to support women’s work in civil organisations committed to sustainability. They are requested to mobilise educational, social and economic resources for fighting female-related discrimination and poverty.

The commitments proposed by the framework document of Agenda 21 to promote gender equity contrasts with the low attention paid to gender in Local Agenda 21 (LA21) in practice. A survey carried out by the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) in 2002 indicated that Europe was

¹ Agenda 21 included an important view on gender issues thanks to the lobbying of women’s groups and institutions organised at the First Women’s World Congress for a Healthy Planet that took place in Miami (Florida, USA) in 1991, a year before the Rio’s Summit. The final document of Agenda 21 contained a specific chapter on women’s and gender issues entitled “Global Action for Women towards Sustainable and Equitable Development” (Chapter 24 of Agenda 21, UN 1992).

the continent in which more LA21 initiatives had been started (5.292 LA21 in 36 countries). The analysis of the survey revealed that local authorities had improved public participation and that they had been able to reach out their communities. Yet, it also pointed to “the need to continually encourage explicit inclusion of particularly under-represented groups such as women, ethnic groups and youth” (ICLEI, 2002).

A major consequence of the gender-blindness of LA21 is the much higher presence of male politicians and governmental officers, experts, stakeholders and citizens in the whole process.

This situation is well illustrated by the participatory activities of the LA21 of Catalonia (Spain), which started in 1998. Informative sessions were organised for engaging stakeholders and citizens. Each one included oral presentations of experts from the Consultative Forum², politicians and technical officers of the government. In all, seven sessions took place and 37 people were invited to give a speech. From those, 31 were men and 6 were women. There were four sessions with no female speakers, and one session with 4 men and 1 woman. Only 2 sessions had a balance of 3 males and 2 females³.

The Catalan LA21 promoted the active participation of stakeholders and citizens through thematic and regional meetings. Discussion groups were organised along themes for thematic meetings. In the case of regional meetings, each event took place in a diverse region and addressed all thematic issues. To both, representatives of diverse socioeconomic public and private entities were invited, and citizens could participate by showing their interest.

Again, the absence of a gender strategy was visible at the moment of inviting participants. Regional meetings were unequal in terms of gender representation. In total, 104 men and 56 women were invited⁴. By contrast, a global balance between genders (118 men and 100 women) existed in the case of thematic

² The Consultative Forum of the LA21 of Catalonia was the first working group created for assessing the development of the agenda. It was composed by 89 experts, from which only 13 were women (source: authors' processing from the information provided at <http://www6.gencat.net/a21cat/cami/forum.htm>).

³ Source: authors' processing from the information provided at “Consell Assessor per al Desenvolupament Sostenible, 2001. Aportacions a l'Agenda 21 de Catalunya. El compromís de Catalunya per a un futur sostenible. Fase d'informació (Febrer-juny 2001). Generalitat de Catalunya.

⁴ Source: authors' processing from the information provided at <http://www6.gencat.net/a21cat/home.htm>.

meetings. However, this was not the case for the specific working groups. For instance, the one on “territory and mobility” which dealt with key issues such as “regional politics”, “cities”, and “rural and mountainous areas”, had significant higher male participation (20 men and 3 women).

The male predominance in political, scientific and technical arenas of environmental planning in Spain (Sánchez de Madariaga, 2004; Velázquez, 2004; Durán and Hernández-Pezzi, 1998; Colectivo de Mujeres Urbanístas, 1998) helps explain, at least in part, the gender imbalance in participatory governance practices. Hardly any gender sensitive data is available for the Catalan case, but some general statistics may be illustrative of this situation. When the participatory process of the Catalan LA21 took place (1999-2003 legislature), only 27,4% members of the Catalan Parliament, 6,9% of mayors and 17,7% of council members were female (Institut Català de les Dones, 2005a). In addition, whereas increasingly more women enter the scientific arena, specific university degrees still have a higher male representation. In 2001 women represented only 26,3% of the graduates in engineering and architecture studies of the Catalan universities (Institut Català de les Dones, 2005b).

The Catalan situation illustrates the urgency of promoting women’s involvement in scientific and technical education and in planning related professions and policy making bodies. However, representation is not the only issue mentioned by Agenda 21 to enhance sustainable development through gender-related politics. The report also encouraged governments to address gender issues in research and policy making towards sustainability, in terms of “gender-sensitive databases, information systems and participatory action-oriented research and policy analyses” (UN, 1992).

Again, according to the ICLEI statistics this has been addressed by European LA21 only in a limited way. A survey to local authorities carried out in 2001 found that out of 127 LA21 only 12 dealt with “women’s issues”, 10 expressed that it was an activity underway, and the reminder 105 declared they didn’t address any women-related subject. The results revealed that “women’s issues” was the third highest topic ignored from a list of 26 areas of activity (ICLEI, 2001).

Unfortunately, the ICLEI survey only asked how many LA21 initiatives included the topic “women’s issues”, but it didn’t assess how they addressed *gender*. The case of the Catalan LA21 illustrates that even when gender is incorporated in the agenda, little room may be left for applying it as a critical view of environmental topics.

The basic document informing the discussion in participatory sessions of LA21 was called “Preliminary Consultative Document of the Agenda 21 of Catalonia”. Seven major areas were included: Governance, Economic development and competitiveness, Welfare and human development, Territory and mobility, Strategic sectors, Strategic resources and Global challenges (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2002). Only “Welfare and human development” showed a gender insight. Next table summarises the introduction of women and gender-related issues in this area:

Table 1. Women and gender-related issues addressed by the Preliminary Consultative Document of the Agenda 21 of Catalonia (Spain)

Women in the labour market

- Advocacy of measures to enhance equal opportunities in the labour market and to fight the high female unemployment and the low status of female-related jobs.
- Promotion of gender equity in the household and recommendation of political actions to make family responsibilities compatible with professional occupation.

Gender as a feature of social exclusion

- Suggestion of political commitment to fight social exclusion linked to geographical, economic, social, cultural, physical, gender, age and educational factors.

Gender equal participation in public life

- Advocacy of measures to ensure gender equity in political, scientific and technological bodies.

Source: Author’s processing from *Preliminary Consultative Document of the Agenda 21 of Catalonia* (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2002).

The example shows that gender inequity is addressed as a socioeconomic problem based on the unequal distribution of labour and income and on the low female representation in scientific and political structures. These are important issues for advancing gender justice, but they do not connect gender and

environment-related issues. The Catalan agenda only incorporates mainstream gender politics, instead of seeing gender as a way to fight against the environmental crisis.

This paper states that this approach to gender and the environment is narrow and reductionist. In addition it might have the side effect of obscuring the diversity of contributions that could arrive from gender studies. I will argue that gender is a crosscutting perspective to diverse environment related issues, and that it should assess environmental governance practices and bring proposals to enhance them. Gender studies contributions will be exposed in relation to two main conceptual frameworks: equity and difference.

Assessing gender *equity* in the environment and in policy related initiatives

The main scope of gender research has been to identify and analyse women-related social and economic unfairness. The ideological thinking that women and men should share the benefits, the responsibilities and the burdens of society on an equal basis stimulates this kind of study (Fraser, 2003, 1996; Young, 2000, 1990).

When gender studies address environment related issues, they *assess* the social *equity of problems and conflicts* and of *political initiatives* finding solutions. Three main arguments lead to significant contributions to environmental governance.

First, gender roles in the private sphere and the gendered division of labour suggest that men and women are exposed to and influence the degradation of the environment in diverse ways. Key issues are the role of women as managers of the environment at the community level and the specific knowledge they have developed (Littig, 2003).

Second, gender (together with other variables such as race and class) enables us to identify population at risk for environmental degradation (Brú-Bistuer and Agüera-Cabo, 2004). Women and children are more likely to be affected by the

deterioration of the health and living conditions of their communities due to negative economic circumstances (Agarwal, 2002; 1992).

Third, the low representation of women in scientific and politic bodies provokes that women-related issues and perspectives go unheard, which could have unexpected side effects on females, who have socioeconomic conditions and lifestyles different from males (Caiazza and Barrett, 2003).

All these insights on gender equity are crosscutting environment-related issues. In practice, they may contribute to environment-related policy making, as illustrated by the following example taken from a study on gender and energy.

Table 2. Example of contribution of gender studies to energy-related politics: “Gender and Energy. A Perspective From the North” (Roehr, 2001)

An analysis of the German energy sector showed gender as a very significant variable for interpreting patterns of consumption. In particular, single parents (from which 90% are women) were found to consume more energy than other social groups. Their daily household and professional responsibilities hampered the adoption of saving attitudes. In addition, single parents were a social group suffering from economic deprivations, which could be aggravated by environmental strategies pushing the energy cost system. By contrast, elderly women were found to be low energy consumers. Their traditional gender values and their economic limitations helped explaining this tendency. Such gender behavioural patterns call for political programmes that handle the over-consumption of single parents without burdening their financial constraints. At the same time, they may reward the saving behaviour of elderly women by having a positive impact on their poor incomes.

Besides, women continue to be the major responsible of everyday caring and household work. Political programmes that promote saving attitudes in water and electricity consumption, inform citizens about food quality labelling, or perform garbage collection, etc. might consider women as a main target. Moreover, women are social agents in educating the family members about daily life behaviours. The design of policies may involve gender expertise. Programmes may also consider their potential influence for fighting gender inequities in the distribution of domestic work.

Source: authors’ summary from the information provided by Roehr (2001).

The example shows that the application of the gender perspective to the energy sector enables us to (1) identify single parents and elderly women as major and minor energy consumers respectively, and point to the socio-economic gender-linked reasons that explain this pattern, (2) find a female-sensitive strategy in relation to the energy cost system, and (3) propose women as “experts” and target groups for the development of energy-related policies oriented towards the household.

Looking at the “equity” approach of gender studies to the environment from a global point of view, we may conclude that main contributions are based on developing countries (UNEP, 2004; Braidoti et al., 1994). In this area, we find interesting practice-oriented studies of environmental issues related to energy, water and agriculture.

Nevertheless, we also find important contributions in industrialised countries. For instance, the thematic field of gender and energy is increasingly receiving interesting insights, particularly to renewable energies⁵. Another main issue for gender researchers is the study of women’s consumer power for lobbying the industry and the government (Littig, 2003; Seager, 1993). They point to women’s exclusion from business and political decisions concerning production, and they have also denounced industry for manipulating female consumers. A well-known case is the female-oriented organisation Women’s Environment Network⁶ (WEN). It is a main player in lobbying the industry for avoiding negative effects on the environment and on women and children’s health in their productions. Examples of their successful campaigns include the request of reducing chlorine in sanitary protection and diapers, the claim of excess packaging in supermarkets’ products, or the work in raising awareness about the environmental impact of disposable diapers, amongst others.

Hazardous toxics are another gender-related research issue in industrialised countries. Studies point to the role of women in grassroots organisations mobilised around toxic waste conflicts (Brown, 2000; Brown and Ferguson, 1997; Brú-Bistuer, 1996). Health risks in jobs mainly occupied by women in which chemical products are used (household activities, cleaning or industrial jobs –e.g. cosmetics-) and the impacts of chemicals on the female body, particularly during diverse phases of the biological cycle (puberty, pregnancy, baby-feeding, menopause and old age) are other main topics (WEN, 2005; WECF, 2003). Besides, gender studies have shown environmental impacts caused by western industries in developing countries -like dumping hazardous chemicals or selling unsafe products-, and their negative effects on women’s health and living conditions (Seager, 1993).

⁵ See Gena Net web site www.genanet.de.

⁶ See WEN’s web site www.wen.org.uk

Gender *differences* in the values, interests and views on the environment

By contrast to the conceptual framework of equity, some gender researchers have been interested in studying commonalities between women, and to specify *differences* from men. This kind of study is connected to the ideological purpose of noting women's specific contribution to society, and to denounce the male bias of the public sphere.

Women do not form a group, because race, class, age, occupation, sexual orientation and many other social and economic factors entail many different types of women. Yet, the study of gender differences from the point of view that femininity and masculinity involve different experiences for women and men is possible. Gender consists in a set of cultural roles that involve specific attitudes and values. Individuals may accept or refuse many of these socio-cultural assignments, but still they play an important part in our daily life.

Thus, women and men may have diverse concerns for the environment because of their different gender experiences. Gender and particularly Ecofeminist authors have used biology-based and socio-political hypothesis to point to the role of caring as the source of a specific female concern with the environment.

On the one hand, the essentialist interpretation states that biological capacities related to mothering, like birthing and feeding (and also menstruation and menopause) mean that women have a specific and unique link with life, and explain that caring is a natural attitude for women. This argument has been mainly used by cultural ecofeminism (Orenstein, 2003; Eisler, 1990; Spretnak, 1982, 1990; Starhawk, 1990).

In this way, ecofeminists have contributed to note the social value of women's traditional work in the private sphere. However, this argument considers caring as an innate female skill, a taken-for-granted attitude and task of women, and not a choice of each individual. It supports the patriarchal idea that men cannot (naturally) be engaged in caring responsibilities (as they do not have the biological capacity of giving and sustaining life). Besides, as a side effect the diversity of women identities (which only sometimes may include the mother role) are obscured (Stearney, 1994).

On the other hand, the female carer role has been interpreted by gender scholars as a culturally-based gender assignment. Traditionally, women have been considered as “natural” carers. The patriarchal thinking sees the role of caring as an innate female capacity and therefore a responsibility of women. In practice, this argument is reinforced by the conventional gendered division of labour in households and the majority of women as paid carers. Although men are increasingly more engaged in household activities, women continue to support much paid and unpaid work related to homemaking and caring. They are predominantly the family members responsible for giving physical and psychological attention to children, the ill and the disabled. In addition, the current ageing of Western populations calls for an increasing demand of carers. These unseen workplaces are again biased by gender, race and class due to globalisation processes (Dyck, 2005).

As part of the (contextual and contingent) experience of femininity, the carer role contributes to building personal values and interests of women, and thus gender may play an important part in defining the concerns of (many) women for the environment. That argument has been exploited by materialist ecofeminists (Mellor, 2002; Salleh, 1994). Women’s specific relation with nature is not seen as deterministic and universal, but dependent of a historical and geographical context. The value of that view is linked to the oppressive position of women in patriarchal societies. It is therefore considered as an insurrectional form of resistance which brings a unique view on society and nature: “while women’s socially reproductive labors under capitalism are oppressive to varying degrees, these labours also impart valuable kinds of knowledge, regardless of race or class differences between women. There are many positive aspects to the woman-nature link, not least a very profound epistemological challenge embedded within it.” (Godfrey, 2005: 53).

The argument of women having a specific concern for the environment has been explored in practice-oriented studies, although unfortunately theoretical contributions from Ecofeminism have been not acknowledged or are ignored in most cases. Consequently, those empirical studies lack of robust theoretical interpretations.

Nevertheless results are worth of consideration. Most studies agree that there is a pattern of a female concern for environment-related health and security issues (Caiazza and Barret, 2003; Boetzkes, 1998; Mohai, 1997; Brown and Ferguson, 1997; Blocker and Eckberg, 1997; Davison and Freudenburg, 1996). General population pools have shown that environmental risk perception is higher for females than for males. They have also found that women do not tend to perceive the benefits of our strongly industrialised societies as much as men (Agüera-Cabo, 2006a; Satterfield et al., 2004; Dietz et al., 2002; Finucane et al., 2000; Boetzkes, 1998; Davison and Freudenburg, 1996; Flynn et al., 1994; Gutteling and Wiegman, 1993).

A national pool about the social perception of science and technology in Spain pointed to a specific female interest for health-related issues, too. It also revealed that women were more critical than men about the social benefits of science and technology and that they were also more concerned about the application of measures to control technologies that could have unexpected side effects (Pérez Sedeño, 2004).

In addition, qualitative studies of citizens' committees that campaign for local environmental conflicts have observed that women enrol in high numbers and have pointed to a specific female concern for environmental problems that negatively affect health and living conditions of relatives and of the community (Agüera-Cabo, 2006a; 2006b; Brown and Ferguson, 1997; Brú-Bistuer, 1996).

These findings illustrate the importance of considering gender differences in participatory practices in order to develop more pluralist decision making processes. They show that gender enables us to identify diverse views on the environment, which could involve different framing and prioritisation of environmental problems and of alternative solutions.

Is there a gender, class, cultural... bias in policy science?

Scholars researching the field of governance have demonstrated that policy related problems in which science is engaged are intrinsically complex and that not one but a variety of solutions may exist. Diverse actors could be involved in the discussion of the problem with their own views and values. In these cases,

scientific knowledge should not be the only source for political decision making, but instead, it should inform the diverse perspectives playing a part in the debate (Craye 2006; Strand and Cañellas-Boltà, 2006; Funtowicz, 2006; Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1994, 1993).

The recognition of the role of diverse views and values in policy science opens the path of gender contributions to the assessment of environment related research. The gender perspective calls into question the neutrality of the relevant knowledge that informs the decision making. We should also consider if the scientific knowledge is properly informing the different actors engaged in the participatory process. Both are valuable considerations for improving the “openness”, “participation”, “accountability”, “effectiveness”, and “coherence” of governance practices (EC, 2001).

Whose interests and values are addressed by the research activity? Which arguments are receiving scientific support? Which sciences are carrying the research and which methodological approaches are chosen? Is there a gender, class, cultural... bias in policy knowledge?

The way in which gender studies may bring new insights to environment-related policy relevant research in practice is well illustrated by the Gender Impact Assessment of the specific programmes of the Fifth Framework Programme of the European Commission (Laurila and K. Young, 2001). The definition and the indicators used for assessing the programmes view gender as transformative of current research practices, in reference to the content of the research agenda, to the scientists engaged in the research activity and to the multidisciplinary approach of the methodology.

Table 3. Consideration of gender in the "Gender Impact Assessment of the specific programmes of the Fifth Framework Programme of the EC"

Definition:

"A true integration of gender into research would profoundly affect the way in which scientific knowledge is *defined, valued and produced, the methodologies that are invoked, and the theoretical reflections to which such new modes of knowledge give rise*" (Laurila and K. Young, 2001, emphasis added)

Indicators used for assessing the sub-programme of "Environment and Sustainable Development":

- Women's participation
 - Understanding of gender issues
 - Inclusion of women's issues and needs in the research agendas
 - Recognition of gender impacts together with risk impact and ethical issues of sustainability
 - Positive consideration of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary methods
 - Attention to scientific, political and ethical dimensions of sustainable development
 - Inclusion of women's role as changing agents
-

Source: Author's summary from "*Gender in Research. Gender Impact Assessment of the specific programmes of the Fifth Framework Programme*" (Laurila and K. Young, 2001).

The example shows that the contributions of gender studies to environment-related research are to assess (1) the scientific framing of the problem, (2) the definition, collection and analysis of relevant data, and (3) the epistemological and methodological roots of the research.

As mentioned before, gender is significant for interpreting different concerns for the environment. Gender studies may assess if the scientific framing of the problem is addressing the diversity of gender-related values and views engaged in the discussion.

Before, I also pointed to the relevance of gender for assessing the social inequity related to environmental problems and conflicts, and I emphasized the potential side effects of gender-blind environment-related political initiatives. Thus, gender should crosscut the analysis of the environmental problem and should be significant for the definition and collection of relevant data.

Besides, gender studies may assess the epistemological and methodological roots of the research activity. Feminist authors have largely discussed the value-laden nature and the gender bias of the stereotyped ideal scientist that still describes the worldview of many male and female scientists. The ideal scientific pattern would be based on a western masculine “myth” which qualities include objectivity, rationality, abstract thinking, simplification, control and certainty (Harding, 2004; 1991; Rose, 1994; Fox Keller, 1992). In contrast, the myth of femininity involves qualities and values that are typical of the private sphere (and alien to the scientific activity): trust in subjectivity, collective experience and intuition, cooperative attitudes, multifunctional approaches and social and ethical responsibility, just to name a few. Thus, (human) qualities that have been traditionally related to femininity are a source of new and alternative skills for the research activity.

Yet, gender and feminist researchers still discuss if the access of women to research will automatically change the practice of science⁷. This raises the question of whether we could state that scientific, technical or managerial activities carried by females are “different” from male ones.

For some authors, feminists (with their political outlook) and not female scientists themselves are bringing different perspectives to science (Schiebinger, 1999). However, although (human) qualities traditionally assigned to femininity do not belong exclusively to females, women have a large experience in seeing the world from this standpoint and value-system (Harding, 2004). Women may not necessarily but potentially bring alternative views to research and management.

The analysis of Evelyn Fox Keller about the life and work of the cytogeneticist Barbara McClintock has been seen as the prove that women could bring ‘different’ contributions to the practice of science. McClintock was not a feminist. Yet, she had a vision of science premised on “feeling for the organism” instead of “dominating nature” -on which modern science has founded-. She considered herself as an observer of nature’s “capacities” and not a searcher of nature’s laws. This assumption led her to dissident observations that brought

⁷ See as example the empirical study of Luzzadder-Beach and Allison Macfarlane (2000).

new conclusions to science. According to Fox Keller, mainstream science would have considered the same observations and conclusions as mistakes or errors (Fox Keller, 1992).

Likewise, feminine-related views, values and experiences could involve that (some) female researchers and practitioners bring alternatives to business as usual issues, scientific frames and methodologies. This hypothesis is suggested by a qualitative study that compares diverse LA21 processes in Australia, in which gender-related patterns were reported. According to the authors' observations, female planners were giving priority to social integration and participation. They aimed at strengthening the political commitment with the community, valued equal participation, and developed tools for getting close to the local interests. By contrast, male planners emphasised the technical dimension. They focused on developing strategies for particular environmental problems (e.g., bush conservation or water management), addressed big picture issues (e.g. greenhouse effects, biodiversity) and during consultation processes gave priority to the knowledge of experts (Buckingham-Hatfield and Matthews, 1999).

Last but not least, gender studies urge for interdisciplinary approaches and the involvement of social and human sciences. Previously I argued that typical qualities of the western masculine "myth" prevail among scientists, and that those assigned to femininity have been left aside. However, this is only true to some extent. Historically, diverse trends in social and human sciences have developed "qualitative" methodological approaches (e.g. deconstructionism, ethnography, interviews, survey research and participant observation) (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003), which involve a scientist that uses many of the traditional (human) qualities assigned to femininity. Indeed, the adjective "soft" has been used many times to call social and human sciences (in contrast with "hard" which has been the traditional attribute for physical sciences). Feminist authors have pointed to the cultural linkage between the dichotomies soft/hard and femininity/masculinity in science (Schiebinger, 1999). Therefore, interdisciplinary research and qualitative methods of social and human sciences are seen as ways for fighting gender bias in the scientific practice and,

specifically, in the study of environmental problems (Laurila and K. Young, 2001; Schultz et al. 2001; Schiebinger, 1997).

Gender and participation: further from equal representation

In the beginning of this article I stated that women's low representation in participatory processes is a consequence of the gender-blindness in the practice of governance. I also argued that in its "equity" guise, gender studies have shown the significance of promoting women's engagement in environment-related research and decision making. The conceptual framework of equity is mainly addressing the quantitative aspect of the representation problem. Gender-linked socio-economic fairness of environmental problems may be also considered.

Yet, it is in its difference guise that gender studies have led to qualitative assessments that point to recognise female's singular perspectives and their specific contributions to society. The attention is focused on the chances that female citizens may have to express their visions and the influence that women and gender-related issues may have in the decision-making process. I already mentioned the significance of providing gender-sensitive scientific information. Other questions refer to gender power relations in the discussion and negotiation stages. Does gender (together with class, education, age...) influence in rhetoric and how speakers are perceived by others? Does gender play a part in ruling the discussions and negotiation processes?

According to gender studies, socioeconomic resources are an important factor for explaining gender trends in political participation. Female disadvantages in education, income and occupational status result in less opportunities for women to engage in policy-related activities. In addition, such resources give also the skills that allow one to be more fluent in discussions and to attract the interest of the audience (Burns et al., 2001).

Consequently, it is doubtful whether a male and female balance is enough to reach gender equity in participatory decision-making processes. Gender could be relevant for rhetoric styles and for the public acceptance of specific arguments. For instance, the observation of a case of LA21 in West London (Buckingham-

Hatfield, 1999; Buckingham-Hatfield and Matthews, 1999) found that those participants expressing their interests in the ‘proper’ expert-inspired terminology (which coincided with young males) were more legitimised in the discussion. As a result, their contributions were prioritised. Instead, participants who expressed in “local” or “parochial” terms (which in this case were older women) failed in taking part in the negotiation process.

Even so, socioeconomic inequities are not the only interpretation for explaining women’s lower power in influencing the debate. We should also point to socio-cultural attributes typical of females and males, gender norms and power relations in the public sphere.

Sociolinguistic studies have argued that the traditional predominance of men in diverse public spaces involve that white middle-class male speakers’ rhetoric is taken as the norm (Bucholtz, 2003; Walsh, 2001; Cameron, 1998). Male speakers’ style is perceived as gender-neutral due to common use, but as a result feminine-based public rhetoric becomes less competitive. In the case of environmental grassroots organisations, this may affect the way the opinions of women are perceived by others and the role they may be assigned in the structure of the organisations (often in support tasks) (Agüera-Cabo, 2006b; Walsh, 2001).

Besides, gender studies that focus on the specific characteristics of female political activism indicate that the structure and rules of mainstream policy-related environments may not appeal to the engagement of (many) women. In comparison with traditional political organisations, women are largely involved in citizens’ committees and in grassroots organisations that promote the politicization of the private sphere. This trend has been observed in civil groups emerging from environmental issues (Brown, 2000; Brown and Ferguson, 1997; Seager, 1993). The study of female activism in these contexts suggests that a specific gender trend exists for alliances and cooperative attitudes instead of competence and hierarchy (Denche-Morón, 1998). This argument is well illustrated by Clare Walsh’s comparative study of two grassroots environmental organisations, Friends of the Earth (FoE) and the female-oriented organisation Women Environmental Network (WEN). According to the author, WEN represents a “femininity”-inspired alternative to the hierarchical structure of FoE

because it puts emphasis on “fluidity, networking and collaborative working practices” (Walsh, 2001: 139). WEN’s egalitarian organisational structure could be seen as source of inspiration for enhancing gender equity in policy-related participatory environments.

Conclusions

At the beginning of this paper I used the case of LA21 in the European continent and specifically in Catalonia (Spain) to illustrate that environment related governance practices, and particularly participatory decision making, usually are gender-blind. First, often they show unequal female representation. Second, women and gender related issues are ignored, or they are incorporated in a narrow and reductive way.

By contrast, I have presented some gender studies conclusions that are relevant for environmental policy research and decision making, and for the involvement of citizens in participatory practices. The paper has introduced these contributions according to two main orientations in gender studies, equity and difference. The following list is a summary of them. The background reflection suggests that gender is not another burden that we should add to the long list of problems dealt by sustainable development politics. Instead, it is a lens for assessing the fairness and plurality of environment-related research and decision-making.

This approach allows for the introduction of gender perspectives to participatory processes embedded in environmental governance and may be helpful to:

- (1) bring new insights to research through applying gender insights to current environmental themes (energy, water and agricultural management, hazardous toxics, consumption, etc.);
- (2) transform and/or complement research approaches by considering interdisciplinarity and by engaging social and human sciences;
- (3) gender assess the scientific framing, the data definition, collection and analysis and the epistemological and methodological bases of the research activity;

- (4) ensure a gender balance of scientific, technical and political representatives, stakeholders and citizens engaged in the discussion and decision making activities;
- (5) identify and address diverse gender interests and values in the environmental problem/conflict (e.g. through research support, through the involvement of female-oriented environmental organisations);
- (6) promote the involvement of women as local experts and agents of local change;
- (7) develop mechanisms for empowering female rhetoric and visions in participatory sessions, and to address women's specific interests in the environment (e.g. through female consultation and discussion groups).

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the potential benefits of the introduction of gender perspectives on environmental governance practices, reflecting on two main approaches: “equity” and “difference”.

In its “equity” form, gender studies assess social fairness of environmental problems and conflicts, and of political problem-solving initiatives. They show that men and women may be exposed to and influence the degradation of the environment in different ways. They help to identify population at risk because of environmental problems. They also show that the under-representation of women in environment-related political decision making may lead to unexpected side effects on females and to increased gender inequities.

In its “difference” form, gender contributions point to gender tendencies in citizens’ values, interests and views on the environment. Science feminism also leads to relevant considerations about gender biases related to the scientific framing of problems, the definition, collection and analysis of data, and to the epistemological and methodological roots of the research. Finally, the “difference” approach brings relevant insights to the assessment of participatory processes embedded in environmental decision-making practices.



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