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Diversity

Three lessons for gender equity in biodiversity conservation

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Abstract: Amid a growing global agenda, biodiversity conservation has embraced gender equity as a pillar of equitable and effective practice. Gender equity has become enshrined in the global environment and development agenda through global commitments, policy and funding. However, for various reasons, conservation biodiversity often takes a simplistic view of gender as synonymous with women or as a dualism between women and men. This narrow view risks promoting inequitable processes and ineffective outcomes. Deeper engagement with feminist theory, and feminist political ecology in particular, could help advance biodiversity conservation's approach to how gender is understood, framed and integrated. Engaging with lessons from feminist political ecology can help advance gender equity in conservation through attention to power dynamics, intersectionality, and subjectivity.

Keywords: feminist political ecology, interdisciplinary, intersectionality, gender relationships, social science, subjectivity, norms

Introduction

Gender is a key consideration for equitable and effective biodiversity conservation practice. Ethically, ensuring gender-equitable participation is a cornerstone for respecting, protecting, and promoting human rights (Razavi 2016) and for not disadvantaging anyone in the process of conserving biodiversity. Instrumentally, explicitly including gender can strengthen biodiversity outcomes. In India and Nepal, forest condition (e.g., canopy cover and level of degradation) improved more when forestry executive committees were gender balanced than when committees were composed mostly of men (Agarwal 2009). Gender considerations have become enshrined in the global environment and development agenda through global commitments (e.g., sustainable development goals), policy, and funding bodies. Since 2014 parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, the International Panel for Climate Change, the Green Climate Fund, and the Global Environment Facility have established working groups and action plans to address gender equity across conservation projects, in professional leadership (Manolis et al. 2009), and in conservation as a scientific discipline (Handley et al. 2015). This global agenda mandates that biodiversity conservation consider gender in professional practice and activities.

However, the treatment and inclusion of gender in biodiversity conservation could be greatly improved. Many projects remain gender blind (Brown & Fortnam, 2018; Kariuki & Birner, 2016) or treat gender as a women-versus-men problem and only address women's issues. Alongside lack of technical capacity, awareness, and interdisciplinary training (Mai et al. 2011), viewing people as either the ends or means of conservation (Mace 2014) influences whether gender equity is pursued for its own sake (intrinsic value) or as a means to enhance conservation effectiveness (instrumental value) and thus affects how deeply conservation engages with gender. Simplistic treatment of gender may lead to perverse outcomes, such as increasing women's labor burden or backlash from powerful stakeholders (Arora-Jonsson 2014).

One avenue to achieving gender equity in conservation is to draw on fields with a strong lineage of theoretical and empirical work on gender and the environment, particularly feminist political ecology (FPE). Political ecology asks how power emerges and shapes outcomes and inequities in environmental governance projects, including biodiversity conservation (Ahlborg & Nightingale 2018). Feminist political ecology emerged when political ecologists turned to feminist theories that considered power as relational, situational, and emergent (rather than fixed, owned, or held by individuals or

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institutions) (Ahlborg & Nightingale 2018; Svarstad et al. 2019). Feminist political ecologists investigate the power-laden processes of environmental governance and practice that create, reinforce, challenge, or transform multidimensional gendered experiences and shape uneven access to resources and opportunities (Elmhirst 2015; Nightingale 2017). An FPE lens thus illuminates a broader range of considerations for conservationists pursuing gender equity. Feminist political ecology offers conservation science the following lessons: understand gender as a sociocultural construction related to power and investigate intersectionality to ultimately reflect power and gendered subjectivities.

Defining Gender

Rather than biological differences between women and men, gender refers to the sociocultural constructions of masculinity and femininity that shape people's opportunities, experiences, social practices, and relations in day-to-day life. As such, gender may be thought of as the "sociocultural layer that sits atop biological sex differences" (MacGregor 2017:3) and differs across contexts, times, and circumstances (Nightingale 2017). Investigating gender in a given context involves asking "what makes 'men' men and 'women' women" (Arora-Jonsson 2014:305) and attending to gender identities beyond this dualism (Davies 2010). For FPE gender norms are characterized by power processes. Feminist political ecology examines how these processes shape people's interactions with their environments, from the resources they extract to their values, preferences, and participation in decision making (MacGregor 2017).

Research in FPE shows that the construction of gender is actively produced and sustained across different scales, from the intimate (individual's private lives), within households and communities, to national and international policies. In other words, "the personal is political" (Hanisch 1970). For example, in Indonesia, state forestry policies adopted a specific view of the family that "inculcat[ed] gendered and hetero-normative ideologies" (Elmhirst 2011:173) because people could only gain access to forestry resources if they were in a conjugal relationship (namely, part of heteronormative family). Thus, rather than innate, gender relations are repeated, contested, adjusted, and reinstilled through everyday practices governing biodiversity use across scales (Nightingale 2017). These relations can manifest in gendered divisions of space, labor, rights, responsibilities, and care (Rocheleau et al. 1996). For instance, in some contexts gender norms may shape the spaces and places women and men can inhabit and livelihood activities they undertake. In many customary management systems, it is taboo for pregnant or menstruating women to collect certain species (Colding & Folke, 2001).

Intersectionality

Within the power processes discussed above, not all women or all men have the same experiences. Rather, gender norms and relationships intersect with multiple lines of difference including ethnicity, race, age, class, and marital status. The theory of intersectionality emphasizes that marginalization across these lines of difference (e.g., race and gender) is not the sum of marginalization across each axis, but rather a distinct experience (Crenshaw 1989). For example, in Tanzania a women's marital status may determine whether she can access strategies for climate-change adaptation delivered by outside projects, whereas for men marital status matters less (Van Aelst & Holvoet, 2016). Thus, marital status intersects with gender to shape resilience. Similarly, in Tonle Sap, Cambodia, women with relationships with powerful men in the village are most involved in fisheries management, whereas women in female-headed households are not involved at all, an intersection of gender relationships, marital, and social status (Resurreccion 2012).

Drawing on intersectionality theory, feminist political ecologists argue that "environmental transformation will lead to transformations in how social difference is defined and performed" (Nightingale 2017:11). In other words, certain groups may reinforce their dominance, whereas other groups may experience further marginalization through environmental management or change, or vice versa. For example, in Botswana, agrarian restructuring and a rural–urban shift has allowed some women with low incomes to subtly redefine their roles and economic opportunities by claiming rights to marginal residential land and establishing successful commercial poultry businesses (Hovorka 2006).

Subjectivity

Subjectivity refers to how people experience everyday life in relation to authority and power. Feminist political ecology asks how power relations within society position or treat people in different ways, in what they can and cannot do, in what is right and wrong, and where the bounds of discussion are (Nightingale 2017). This task requires asking how people come to internalize certain identities and the opportunities or barriers related to these identities. A key conceptual move in FPE is the idea that power, subjectivities, and the natural environment are coconstituted (Ahlborg & Nightingale 2018). In other words, the environmental discourses, policies, or scientific framings of environmental problems shape the environment and people both overtly and covertly. As such, how people are subjected in different processes (e.g., decision making), contexts (e.g., rural communities and undergraduate classes), and moments (e.g., meetings) can transform social and

environmental injustices or further entrench them. For example, in some payments for ecosystem services schemes, women are positioned as instrumental in realizing environmental protection and economic empowerment through market inclusion (Westholm & Arora-Jonsson 2015). In addition, gender inequalities in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields, including conservation science, are part of enduring gender stereotypes and biases that position women as caretakers and men as breadwinners (Handley et al. 2015; Ellemers 2018). Gender stereotypes continue to shape and subtly reinforce opportunities for women and men in STEM professions (Moss-Racusin et al. 2015).

These key ideas from FPE can help conservationists incorporate gender more reflexively, reemphasizing there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Although other barriers to realizing gender equity remain, without attention to power dynamics and context-specific understanding, conservation has no means to determine whether projects and policies are gender reinforcing or changing gender relationships. Approaching gender as power-laden sociocultural construct requires investigating intersectionality to understand gendered subjectivities. As the world pivots toward gender equity in all arenas, the time is ripe for biodiversity conservation research and practice to move toward the pole star of gender equity. Feminist political ecology can provide at least part of the map.

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