

RESEARCH ARTICLE

WOMEN AS ECOFEMINIST LEADERS: TRANSFORMING FOREST MANAGEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT IN WEST BENGAL

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ABSTRACT

This study, grounded in ecofeminism, explores the intersection of women's empowerment and forest conservation within women-led Forest Protection Committees (FPCs) in West Bengal. It highlights how women's leadership in Community-Based Forest Management (CBFM) challenges patriarchal power structures and enhances sustainable conservation efforts. By incorporating traditional ecological knowledge, women not only improve forest management practices but also gain increased social standing, economic independence, and decision-making power. The findings offer actionable insights into the links between gender equality and environmental governance, with relevance for policymakers in the Global South.

KEYWORDS

Ecofeminism, women's empowerment, forest conservation, gender equality, environmental governance

1. INTRODUCTION

"We have worked on this forest for years, spending each drop of our blood and sweat here. This forest... it's like a child we've nurtured, and at the same time, it's like our mother who has always provided for us." (Women Members of Brindabanpur Mahila Forest Protection Committee, 2024)

The exploitation of nature and the subjugation of women are not isolated phenomena, but interconnected processes driven by the capitalist patriarchy—a system deeply entrenched in the economic and social fabric of both the Global North and South. Through colonization and the expansion of capitalist markets, the Global North has imposed a model of development on the Global South that prioritizes profit over sustainability, often leading to the depletion of natural resources and the marginalization of women. As study in 2012 argues, the ideology of capitalist patriarchy arrived in the Global South as part of colonization, bringing with it concepts of "progress" and "development" that ultimately benefited only the colonizers, while reinforcing gendered and ecological exploitation (Shoba, 2012). In recent decades, neoliberalism and globalization have further entrenched these exploitative dynamics, creating environmental degradation on an unprecedented scale (John, 2002). Global financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), alongside multinational corporations, have played pivotal roles in shaping an economic system that extracts labor and natural resources from the Global South for the benefit of powerful countries and corporate interests (Hart, 2005). This global economic structure, based on free trade and corporate control, extends its reach into sectors as diverse as agriculture, healthcare, and environmental governance, systematically marginalizing both nature and women in the process.

Ecofeminists from the Global South argue that this form of economic exploitation is not only ecological but also deeply gendered. A study highlight, patriarchal violence against women has intensified, taking new forms as it merges with capitalist modes of exploitation (Mies and Shiva, 2014). The result is a system where both women and nature are viewed as objects to be controlled, commodified, and manipulated for profit. This exploitation is most visible in rural areas where women, often responsible

for managing natural resources, bear the brunt of environmental degradation while receiving little recognition or support for their work. The link between women and nature is both material and symbolic. Women in rural areas, particularly in the Global South, are disproportionately affected by environmental crises, as their livelihoods are intricately tied to land, water, and other natural resources (Saxena, 2012). Yet, it is this very connection to the environment that positions women as potential agents of change. Through their everyday interactions with nature, women develop ecological knowledge that can play a transformative role in environmental conservation efforts. It was explained by researcher, ecofeminism posits a dualistic relationship in which women are seen as more closely aligned with nature, while men are associated with culture and the domination of nature (Jackson, 1993). This perspective challenges patriarchal assumptions and underscores the importance of integrating women's voices in environmental governance. Ecofeminism offers a critique of both patriarchal and capitalist systems, advocating for an intersectional approach that links gender equality with ecological sustainability. This critical perspective challenges dominant Western ethics and promotes the integration of women's lived experiences, ecological knowledge, and values into environmental policy-making and resource management (Jaggar, 1994).

This study focuses on the Brindabanpur Mahila Forest Protection Committee (BMFPC) in the Joypur Block of Bankura, West Bengal, as a case study of how women-led Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMCs) embody ecofeminist principles in practice. Through their leadership in forest conservation, these women not only challenge traditional gender roles but also offer sustainable alternatives to the capitalist exploitation of natural resources. By highlighting the dynamic relationship between women, nature, and community, this research aims to explore how ecofeminism can serve as both a theoretical framework and a practical tool for promoting gender equity and ecological sustainability in the Global South. This study aims to investigate how the BMFPC is transforming forest governance through its inclusive approach, emphasizing the gendered dimensions of natural resource management. It examines how women's knowledge, rooted in their lived experiences and connection to

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the land, leads to more sustainable forest practices. Additionally, it explores how participation in these committees enhances women's agency, decision-making power, and socio-economic status, thereby disrupting the patriarchal systems that have historically marginalized them.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Brindabanpur village, located within the Joypur block of Bankura district, West Bengal. Situated approximately 3.1 kilometers from the sub-district headquarters at Joypur, the village falls under the jurisdiction of the Panchet Forest Division, which is divided into five ranges. The Joypur forest range, specifically the Joypur beat, serves as the focal area of this study, where the Brindabanpur Mahila Forest Protection Committee (BMFPC) operates. Initially comprising 56 women members, the BMFPC currently has 52 active members following the passing of four members. This study includes the entire population of 52 committee members, employing a full enumeration sampling technique due to the small population size. This approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the perspectives and experiences of all members, enhancing the depth and richness of the collected data. The committee is responsible for protecting 93 hectares of forest land, engaging in various conservation activities such as patrolling, organizing awareness campaigns, and community mobilization.

2.1 Data collection methods

Both primary and secondary data collection methods were utilized to gain a holistic understanding of the BMFPC's operations. Primary data were collected using qualitative methods, which included Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), semi-structured interviews, and participant observation, along with quantitative methods via interviews. Four FGDs were conducted, each involving 8-10 participants, to capture group dynamics and collective insights on forest management and conservation challenges. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four key informants, including the committee's office bearers, local forest officials, and staff involved in forest protection efforts. These interviews were audio-recorded (with consent) and lasted between 20-30 minutes each, providing detailed insights into individual roles, responsibilities, and decision-making processes within the committee.

Participant observation was employed to immerse the researcher in the daily activities of the BMFPC, including attending committee meetings, participating in forest patrols, and engaging in community events. This method enabled the researcher to directly observe and participate in the committee's routine functions, offering a deeper understanding of their decision-making processes, power dynamics, conflict resolution mechanisms, and the integration of traditional ecological knowledge into forest conservation practices.

Quantitative data were collected through structured interviews using a semi-structured schedule, conducted at the committee members' homes. These interviews focused on household-level information, such as the socio-economic status of the women, their household responsibilities, and their roles within the forest protection committee.

Secondary data were collected from the committee's meeting registers, patrol logs, and member records, which provided additional context and verification for the primary data collected. These records were invaluable in understanding the historical development of the committee and its ongoing activities.

2.2 Data analysis

The data analysis followed a systematic and iterative process to ensure a thorough understanding of the collected information. The initial stage involved data familiarization, where transcripts of FGDs, interviews, and field notes were reviewed multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' narratives.

Next, key themes were identified through an iterative reading process, during which recurring patterns and significant concepts were noted. A coding framework was then developed, informed by the research objectives and the emergent themes from the data. This framework was used to meticulously code the qualitative data, enabling a structured analysis of the participants' experiences.

The study also examined the structural elements of the narratives, focusing on how the participants constructed and communicated their experiences and insights. This structural analysis offered a deeper understanding of the individual and collective perspectives within the community.

A cross-narrative comparison was conducted to identify commonalities and divergences across different narratives. This comparative analysis highlighted shared experiences, such as the collective challenges faced by women in forest management, as well as unique perspectives, such as individual leadership roles within the committee.

The final stage of analysis involved contextual interpretation, wherein the coded data and identified themes were interpreted within the broader socio-cultural and ecological context of the study area. The findings were further theorized using principles from ecofeminism, allowing for a critical analysis of the intersection of gender, environmental conservation, and community dynamics. This interpretation facilitated a deeper understanding of how cultural, historical, and structural realities influence the experiences and contributions of women in forest protection and governance.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Transformation of gendered power dynamics in community forestry

The narratives of the women involved in the Brindabanpur Mahila Forest Protection Committee (BMFPC) illuminate how gendered power relations are both expressed and challenged within forest governance. This community-led initiative disrupts traditional patriarchal norms, providing critical insights into the intersection of gender, caste, and natural resource management. The women's experiences demonstrate that ideas and meanings of nature are not universal but are instead rooted in specific cultural and historical contexts (Gururani, 2002). The formation of the BMFPC in 1991, with 56 women from the village of Brindabanpur, marks a significant shift in community-based forest management, embodying core principles of ecofeminism while challenging traditional gender roles.

A study described how intra-household patriarchal structures across India often subjugate women, with men and their families viewing women as property, subject to legitimate domination (Deshmukh-Ranadive, 2006). Against this backdrop, the BMFPC has emerged as a remarkable example of women taking control of natural resource management, despite facing marginalization due to both gender and caste. The empowerment of marginalized groups, particularly women, in community forestry initiatives must account for the gendered nature of nature-society interrelations. As researchers argue, recognizing the democratic participation of these groups is incomplete without acknowledging this gendered dimension (Elias et al., 2021). The BMFPC's success is measured not only by forest conservation and livelihood security but also by its commitment to gender equity and the empowerment of marginalized women (Nandigama, 2020).

3.1.1 Intersection of caste and gender in forest governance

Caste plays a critical role in shaping the dynamics of community forestry governance. Women from lower-caste communities, like those in the BMFPC, often face compounded marginalization. A study emphasizes the underappreciated contributions of Dalit and other marginalized communities in environmental conservation, noting their critical role in maintaining ecological balance despite systemic discrimination (Valmiki, 2021). The women of Brindabanpur, classified as Scheduled Caste, faced dual marginalization based on gender and caste. In 1991, when poverty forced them to rely on the forest for livelihoods, they received little support from the men in their community. The women, however, recognized their relationship with nature and sought to safeguard both natural resources and their own empowerment, overcoming societal norms that limited their participation in decision-making processes. The leader of the BMFPC explained how the women took the initiative when the men showed little interest, positioning themselves as the primary users and managers of forest resources.



Figure 1: Women Members Participation in JFMC Meetings

3.1.2 Ecological knowledge and sustainable practices

The BMFPC women apply traditional ecological knowledge passed down through generations, which guides their sustainable forest management practices. Gender-specific knowledge and skills in land use, biodiversity conservation, and innovation have strengthened their efforts to protect the forest (Rocheleau, 1995). They practice selective harvesting, rotational grazing, soil conservation, and fire prevention, contributing to the forest's resilience and regenerative capacity. The BMFPC also collaborates with local forest department authorities, patrolling forest areas to monitor illegal activities like poaching and unauthorized tree felling. Their commitment has been acknowledged by the Beat Officer of Joypur Forest, who credited the women for the protection of the forest and its ecosystems.

3.1.3 Economic empowerment and challenges

The BMFPC women collect timber and non-timber forest products (NTFPs), such as Sal leaves, to generate income through the sale of eco-friendly leaf plates. However, they face challenges in accessing markets directly, relying on middlemen who purchase the plates at lower prices and resell them at higher rates. It was noted that trade in natural products

is often one of the few accessible income-generating opportunities for rural women, but market inequalities limit their potential profits (Shackleton et al., 2008)

Despite these challenges, the BMFPC women have achieved a degree of financial independence, opening bank accounts and contributing to household dynamics. This shift in economic power has transformed household dynamics, with women like Ashoka and Jyotsna Lohar expressing pride in their newfound ability to make financial decisions alongside their husbands. The BMFPC's participation in the Compensatory Forest Cultivation (CFC) scheme, which entitles members to a 40% share of the revenue generated from forest produce, further incentivizes community involvement in sustainable forest management.

3.1.4 Reproductive labor and capitalist exploitation

While the BMFPC women have gained economic recognition, their socially reproductive labor remains undervalued. The broader capitalist framework continues to marginalize women's contributions, both in household settings and in the larger economic system. As researchers highlight, socially reproductive labor imparts valuable knowledge, but capitalism often obscures its significance (Godfrey, 2005). The ongoing marginalization of women's invisible work, despite their central role in forest conservation, echoes broader feminist critiques of the reductionist paradigms that dominate economic and environmental governance.

Public violence and patriarchal resistance further complicate the gains made by women in community forestry initiatives. Growing social inequality and the pressures of globalization have led to the reassertion of patriarchal power, sometimes through violence (Baker and Leicht, 2017). This dynamic is evident in the tensions faced by the BMFPC women, whose leadership has sparked both admiration and resistance.

3.1.5 The question of recognition beyond economic contribution

A persistent concern remains whether women are valued only for their economic contributions. In some households, financial independence has shifted power dynamics, but the underlying patriarchal structures that devalue women's non-economic roles endure. The reduction of women's worth to their economic productivity diminishes the broader significance of their work in forest conservation and community building. A study in 1996 suggest that efforts to increase women's involvement in community initiatives can exacerbate social tensions between men and women, raising important questions about the sustainability of these shifts in gender roles (Hobley, 1996).

Table 1: Impact of BMFPC on marginalized communities

Aspect	Before BMFPC Formation	After BMFPC Formation
Caste-Based Participation	Low participation from marginalized communities	Inclusive participation with active involvement of lower-caste women
Women's Role in Governance	Minimal involvement	Central leadership role, led by women
Livelihood Security	Insecure, dependent on forest exploitation	Enhanced through sustainable practices and resource management
Forest Conservation Efforts	Low engagement in conservation practices	High commitment from women-led initiatives, focused on sustainable use and conservation

3.2 Socialist feminism and ecological restructuring

Researchers describes socialism as capital's antagonist and potential successor, advocating for radical ecological restructuring (Kovel, 2005). In this vein, socialist feminism — and by extension, socialist ecofeminism — focuses on a profound transformation of society, as opposed to the redistributive approach of liberal feminism (Berman, 1993). This transformation aims to dismantle the interconnected systems of patriarchy, capitalism, and environmental degradation, which jointly perpetuate both gender inequality and ecological destruction.

Interpreting women's participation in environmental movements, however, is complex. As researcher suggests, understanding the nuances of women's involvement, particularly in participatory forestry, requires a

deep awareness of the context (Locke, 1999). The Brindabanpur Mahila Forest Protection Committee (BMFPC) exemplifies this complexity. While their leadership in forest conservation highlights women's increasing role in environmental management, examining the quality of their participation is crucial. For instance, while women in BMFPC engage more deeply with the depletion of local resources like fuel and non-timber products, men focus on livelihood threats, as their economic interests are more tied to the village commons (Srivastava, 2022). Women's relationships with the environment must be seen within broader power dynamics, including relationships of negotiation, authority, and social relations that frame decisions about land and resources (Leach, 1991). In the context of BMFPC, Table 2 highlights the varied levels of influence among different stakeholders in forest management.

Table 2: Stakeholder analysis matrix: community-based forest management

Stakeholder	Interests	Influence	Impact on Decision-Making
Women's Groups	Access to resources, sustainable use	Medium	Increasing, but often limited
Male Community Leaders	Economic opportunities, traditional authority	High	Significant influence on decisions
Forest Department	Conservation, sustainable management	High	Primary decision-making authority
NGOs	Community empowerment, sustainable practices	Medium	Advisory role, capacity building
Local Government	Development, resource allocation	Medium-High	Policy implementation, funding decisions
Private Sector	Resource extraction, profit	Medium-High	Can influence through economic leverage
Youth Groups	Future sustainability, employment	Low	Limited, but growing involvement

The Forest Department and male leaders still hold significant power, while women's groups, despite their active involvement, often face limitations in decision-making. As shared by one of the members, "The recent forest officers have prevented us from working in the nursery and medicinal garden, where other committees are allowed. We're quite frustrated by this decision. It was us who protected the forest, but now we are excluded from its economic opportunities." This disillusionment reflects the ongoing challenge of achieving true inclusion for women in forest management. Despite their contributions, the deeply embedded patriarchal structures continue to marginalize them, preventing their participation from translating into real influence. Nevertheless, women like Arati Lohar, a member of the BMFPC, proudly affirm, "Attending and voicing our perspectives at JFMC meetings has become routine for us now, after years of advocating for our rightful inclusion." This transformation from passive observers to active participants marks a significant milestone in their journey toward empowerment. However, the disconnection between their participation and actual influence underscores the persistent power dynamics that stifle women's voices, even in ostensibly inclusive forums. This research reveals that women's involvement in forest management tends to be more community-oriented and cooperative, aligning well with sustainable practices (Ray et al., 2016). The BMFPC members recognize their collective strength, despite being a small group: "We may be a small group of women, but our impact has been tremendous. We're proud of what we've accomplished and will continue to work tirelessly to protect our forests and empower our community."

4. CONCLUSION

Women play a pivotal role in forest conservation, and their inclusion in Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMCs) holds immense potential for transformative change. However, true empowerment requires a deeper understanding of gender dynamics that moves beyond a one-dimensional approach. Before the rise of intersectional perspectives, striving for gender equality often felt like viewing the world through a narrow, monochromatic lens. Ecofeminism, as a liberatory social and political movement, offers a more comprehensive vision for change by centering the experiences of those most affected by environmental injustice. It compels humanity to confront and challenge the prevailing power structures that dictate the relationship between people and nature. The Brindabanpur Mahila Forest Protection Committee stands as a prime example of how women can become agents of change through grassroots initiatives. Their fight against deforestation and their efforts to protect indigenous territories go beyond patriarchal power structures, highlighting the agency of indigenous women as defenders of the land. By gaining economic autonomy, these women have disrupted traditional patriarchal norms, empowering themselves to take control of their lives and the environment. To further support women in these roles, policy interventions should focus on creating fair and accessible markets for non-timber forest products (NTFPs). Establishing cooperatives or direct market links would enable women to sell their products without exploitation from intermediaries. Government-supported market outlets should be developed to facilitate the growth of NTFP marketing and farmer cooperatives. Additionally, providing training programs on product packaging, branding, and marketing would allow women to add value to their products, attract premium prices, and reach a wider customer base. Tapping into initiatives like the Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Yojana could ensure the sustainability of this approach. Future research should explore how marginalized groups, particularly women, can effectively voice their concerns and aspirations in decision-making processes at various political levels. This includes addressing critical forest-related issues such as climate change, forest-poverty links, and legality verification. Lessons from Joypur can offer valuable insights for other regions, where women and communities can unite to create more sustainable and equitable solutions. Ultimately, these initiatives underscore the importance of adopting intersectional and inclusive approaches to forest management, recognizing the interconnectedness of gender equality, environmental protection, and sustainable socio-economic development.

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