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## **“Nothing about Us, without Us”: Indigenous women re-politicizing the discourse on gender and environment.**

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**“Nothing about Us, without Us”: Indigenous women re-politicizing the discourse on gender and environment.**

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## **Introduction**

With the growing experiences of the negative consequences of climate change, its social aspects gained attention among scholars and policy makers (Terry, 2009, p. 6). As scholars revealed that climate change “has gender-differentiated causes and effects”, it became a crucial factor in exploring the social aspects (MacGregor, 2010, p. 225). Recently, there has been progress in addressing gender, both in global environmental governance and in National Adaptation Plans around the world (Terry, 2009, p. 12). This development was brought about by the lobbying of feminist scholars and activists (Sultana, 2014, p. 374). The United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) created a special report called Global Gender and Environment Outlook (GGEO), which recognized that women are more vulnerable to the negative impacts of climate change. Moreover, the UN acknowledged the connection between gender equality and sustainable future with “gender equality being at the core of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development ” (GGEO, 2016, p. 4).

Many scholars analyzed the dominant discourse on gender and environment by exploring policy-oriented literature, development projects and UN reports (Arora-Jonsson, 2011; Gonda 2019). They concluded that it is based on the “claim that women are best positioned to fight climate change and are the most affected by it” (Gonda, 2019, p. 90). As Arora-Jonsson (2011) revealed, those claims translate to essentialist depictions of women as vulnerable and virtuous. Women’s conditions are portrayed as their natural and unchangeable traits, silencing the discussion on how they came to be (Elmhirst, 2011, p.130). Consequently, these notions generate an image of women as a group with a coherent identity based on their shared experience of oppression and virtue (Djouidi et. al., 2016, p. 258). Scholars argue that such depictions lead to depoliticization of the discourse as they simplify the complex socio-political issues into matters of group identity (Ruiz & Vallejo, 2019, p. 332). Depoliticization is a situation in which “there is no contestation over the givens of the situation” as it is removed from the arena of political debate (Swyngedouw, 2011, p. 267). The vulnerability and virtuosity become treated as a social fact, closing the debate about their roots and the different ways in which women experience them (Goldman et. al., 2018, p. 4). Subsequently, the discourse fails to address the power relations which created women’s vulnerability and environmental degradation (Gonda, 2019, p. 89). By portraying women’s conditions as unchangeable, it denies them agency, leading to their victimization (Sasser, 2018, p. 11). Such discourse by naturalizing women’s conditions, eventually disempowers them, as it preserves the status quo, in which they hold disadvantaged positions (MacGregor, 2014, p. 627).

Scholars from different approaches such as Feminist Political Ecology, Ecofeminism or Decolonial Feminism tried to re-politicize the discourse by exploring the workings of depoliticization and proposing solutions to this issue (Djouidi et. al., 2016; Gaard, 2011). Yet, their contributions remain limited to academia, as the dominant discourse, on which the practitioners rely remains depoliticized (Resurreccion, 2013, p. 33).

Scholars appeal for a greater dialogue between approaches, as it would broaden the understanding of the problem contributing to the project of re-politicization (Wilson, 2005, p. 350). Another approach promising to re-politicization of the discourse is Indigenous Feminism. As a theoretical and political movement that “provides a powerful critique of colonialism, race, and gendered power relations”, in relation to the environment, it could illuminate the political dynamics behind women’s experiences (MacGregor, 2020, p. 113). However, despite its potential, it is disregarded in problematizing depoliticization (Weiss & Moskop, 2020, p. 3).

This puzzle leads to the following research question:

*How can Indigenous Feminism re-politicize the dominant discourse on gender and environment?*

To answer this question the thesis is structured as follows. First, a literature review on the dominant narratives of women’s virtuosity and vulnerability and their depoliticization is presented. This is followed by presenting Critical Theory Perspective on depoliticization from Feminist Political Ecology, Ecofeminism, and Decolonial Feminism. This serves to outline the construction of these narratives and potential solutions for re-politicization. Then, Indigenous Feminism is examined by conducting discourse analysis of the final declarations of global conferences of Indigenous Women, who gather to express their demands regarding gender equality and environmental justice. This study, by exploring the practical application of Indigenous Feminism in the conferences, offers a comprehensive approach to answering the research question, bridging conceptual solutions from the Critical Theory Perspective with the lived experiences of Indigenous Women. Finally, the conclusion based on the results of the analysis reveals that Indigenous Feminism is a productive approach to re-politicize the discourse. As grounded in lived experiences of racism, sexism, and colonialism it uncovers the unequal social and global power relations, which led to women’s vulnerability and environmental degradation. As an inherently intersectional movement it illuminates women’s diverse experiences, challenging their essentialist depictions. Finally, as a political movement

fighting for women's empowerment, it redirects the discourse to the political realm and challenges the depoliticized and victimized portrayals.

Exploring this question is crucial as the depoliticized discourse exacerbates women's disempowerment by dismissing the political forces that shaped their conditions and denying them agency. This study is especially significant for the academic audiences from Feminist Political Ecology, Ecofeminism or Decolonial Feminism, who explored depoliticization and identified solutions to re-politicize the discourse. Indigenous Feminism, being grounded in lived experiences and having practical orientation, could inform the existing theories about their application in practice and experiences of the marginalized that they problematize. This could enhance the joint project of re-politicization, as alliances between academia and practice are necessary for successful change (Driskill et al., 2011, p. 218). Furthermore, this study is relevant for climate policymakers, as re-politicized discourse would illuminate women's specific needs and capacities without overgeneralizing their circumstances. This could translate to more adequate policies that promote women's advancement and facilitate socio-environmental transformations for a sustainable future (Terry, 2009, p. 6).

## **Literature Review**

### **The dominant discourse**

Many scholars analyzed the discourse on gender and environment by exploring policy-oriented literature, development projects and UN reports (Arora-Jonsson 2011; Gonda 2019; MacGregor 2010). They conclude that the dominant discourse almost exclusively focuses on the greater *vulnerability* of women to the negative consequences of climate change. The assumptions of women's vulnerability are based on the contested thesis of feminization of poverty, which entails that women make up a "disproportionate share of the poor people" (Arora-Jonsson, 2011, p. 746). Women, being among the poorest, are expected to be more vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change, as their adaptive capacities are limited, and their living conditions will be significantly impaired. Moreover, women are presented as more vulnerable because of their greater reliance on natural resources for livelihoods, and because they often perform agricultural and provisioning activities, such as collecting fuel and water (de Wit, 2021, p. 7). Due to environmental degradation their tasks become more difficult as they need to travel further distances to get clean water or firewood and spend more time growing food in hostile conditions (Buckingham, 2000, p. 1).

The other conviction ubiquitous in the discourse is that of *virtuous* women, who have a special sensibility to the environment (Arora-Jonsson, 2011, p. 748). In the context of women in the Global North their virtuosity is attributed to the belief that they are more environmentally conscious than men and more likely to support radical pro-environmental policies (Djoudi et al., 2016, p. 750). Women are presumed to contribute less to the emission of greenhouse gasses and have a smaller ecological footprint due to their lifestyle choices (Terry, 2009, p. 10). The virtuosity applied to women in the Global South translates to portraying them as the caretakers of the environment who use their special awareness of the natural world gained through everyday tasks and help adapt to climate change (MacGregor, 2010, p. 232).

Scholars revealed that the dominant depictions of vulnerability and virtuosity are based on the notion of women's closeness to nature (Resurreccion, 2013, p. 40). This connection underlies the narratives that portray women both as environmental saviors, due to their special bond with nature and as victims because of their reliance and proximity to the environment (Leach, 2007, p. 73). Scholars trace those assumptions back to cultural ecofeminism, which identified a "physiological bond between women and nature through the capacity of women to carry, give birth to and nurse children" (Buckingham, 2000, p. 35). Women's caretaking role translated to seeing them as those in position to protect the environment (Leach, 2007, p. 68). Similarly, spiritual ecofeminists celebrated women's knowledge of the environment and their sensual energy (Buckingham, 2000, p. 35). Those claims were criticized by social ecofeminists who argued that there is nothing inherent about this connection, but it was socially constructed with division of labor in which women conduct the agricultural, close to nature activities (Gaard, 2011, p. 29). Recently, ecofeminists radically moved away from the essentialist women-nature connection, yet the link remains persistent in the dominant discourse (Resurreccion, 2013, p. 33).

### **Depoliticization of the discourse**

Scholars criticize the dominant gender- environment discourse for being limited to women. They argue that gender is not treated as "a social and political relationship between people with masculine and feminine identities" but just as a proxy for women (MacGregor, 2010, p. 228). There is little attention to men, as they are presented only as "relatively less vulnerable and more culpable" than women (MacGregor, 2010, p. 228). Consequently, the benefits of incorporating gender into environmental analysis are not realized, as there is no examination of

the power dynamics between men and women in society and their implications for the environment (Elmhirst, 2011, p. 131).

The discourse is not only limited to women but rather to their essentialist depiction as vulnerable, virtuous (Arora-Jonsson, 2011). Essentialism as defined by Mansbridge (1999) “involves assuming a single or essential trait, or nature, that binds every member of a descriptive group together” (p. 637). Women are portrayed as a homogenous group based on shared characteristics of vulnerability or virtuosity, which oversimplifies their conditions and prevents accounting for the differences between their experiences (Sultana, 2014, p. 374).

It is important to note that the mentioned scholars do not aim to denounce the vulnerability, as it is acknowledged that climate change is “disproportionately hurting women and girls, particularly in developing countries of the Global South.” (MacGregor, 2010, p. 224). However, they argue against its essentialist depictions, as they simplify the complex socio-political conditions of vulnerability and virtuosity into matters of group identity, thereby leading to depoliticization of the discourse (Ruiz & Vallejo, 2019, p. 32).

Depoliticization as defined by Swyngedouw (2010) is the situation in which political issues are removed from the arena of public debate, as experts' knowledge and technological solutions become the basis for decision-making (p. 215). Swyngedouw (2010) identified the "post-political condition of climate change," in which the environmental and social problems resulting from modernity and capitalism are seen as external, incidental effects rather than intrinsic features of the system (p. 228).

Feminist scholars explored the depoliticization of the gender-environment discourse and found that the essentialist notions inhibit political debate “since it is assumed that we know what the problem is – the vulnerability of women” (Arora-Jonsson, 2011, p. 748). Vulnerability and virtuosity are treated as indisputable facts, closing debate about their political origins (Goldman et al., 2018, p. 4). Gonda (2019) argues that such discourse supports the existing “societal system that constantly reproduces unequal gender relations and the causes of climate change” (p.89). Vulnerability, decontextualized from its roots, is treated as an external factor rather than a direct result of the existing system, thereby leaving the status quo unchallenged (Acha, 2019, p. 249). Moreover, as scientists and technocrats remain in the position of framing the dominant discourse, it is based on global-level depictions that are disconnected from the local, lived experiences of women and disregard their perspectives (MacGregor, 2014, p. 626). This results



in overgeneralized portrayals that overlook the diverse experiences of women and dismiss their specific needs (Leach, 2007, p. 74).

Scholars highlight the importance of challenging those depictions as they led to detrimental effects on women in the past. For instance, the convictions about women's vulnerability and virtuosity translated to development programs such as Women Environment, and Development and Gender environment and Development (Leach, 2007, p. 70). MacGregor (2010) found that those programs were "explicitly designed to be carried out by unpaid women volunteers", who became responsible for conducting activities like tree planting or soil conservation (p. 233). The essentialist notions were instrumentalized to justify women's unpaid labor, placing an additional burden on their already extensive list of chores, thereby exacerbating existing inequalities (Leach, 2007, p. 72).

Despite this critique the notions of vulnerability and virtuosity are persistent in the discourse. Nowadays, they translate to women being assigned responsibility for both mitigation and adaptation policies (Sasser, 2018, p. 20). Scholars agreed that they "must reassert the specificity of the political" of the discourse, thus they examined the discourse through various approaches (MacGregor, 2014, p. 630).

### **Critical Theory Perspective**

In this study, a Critical Theory Perspective on depoliticization from the lenses of Feminist Political Ecology, Ecofeminism, and Decolonial Feminism is presented. These approaches were chosen because they represent the main schools, which examined this issue, outlined its different aspects, and proposed solutions, based on their respective expertise. This section is structured as follows: firstly, the problems with depoliticized discourse are presented, then the construction of narratives behind it is explained, followed by their negative consequences and the solutions delivered by each approach.

### **Feminist Political Ecology**

The main school which explored depoliticization of the gender-environment discourse is Feminist Political Ecology (FPE). As a subfield of Political Ecology, it examines the relationships between nature and society through the lens of power dynamics, which determine access and control over resources (Peet & Watts, 2004, p. 3). It specifically brings feminist theory into the field, to illuminate the complex interconnections between gender relations and

the environment and to promote goals of social and environmental justice (Elmhirst, 2011, p. 129).

The main issue with the depoliticized discourse problematized by FPE is the lack of account for the power relations in society, which created the conditions of vulnerability and the alleged virtuosity. The dominant discourse is limited to exploring who is vulnerable and who is not, as opposed to finding root causes of these conditions and challenging them (Djouidi et. al., 2016, Gonda, 2019, p. 90).

To restore the political in the discourse, FPE proposes an understanding of gender as a socially constructed category which, entwined in gendered power relations translates to diverging adaptive capacities in response to climate change (Pearse, 2017, p. 3). Such understanding of gender illuminates the roots of vulnerability in patriarchal structures of inequality. They reveal how gender relations are shaped by patriarchy, which privileges men and leads to women's unequal access to resources, property rights, and decision-making bodies (Pearse, 2017, p. 1). These inequalities are the root causes of women's vulnerability to climate change, as they undermine women's adaptive capacities and lead to exclusion of their voices (Arora-Jonsson, 2011, p. 748). Moreover, patriarchy creates a gendered labor division in which women are expected to perform agricultural and provisioning tasks, which leads to assumptions about their virtuosity (Acha, 2019, p. 250).

Another problem identified by FPE is the homogenous depictions of vulnerability and virtuosity, which prevent acknowledging the diversity of experiences among women (Huynh & Resurreccion, 2014, p. 226). To challenge this, FPE scholars propose an intersectional analysis of the context of women's conditions. Intersectionality is a theory, which examines how different categories of identity such as race, class, gender, age, sexual orientation, and (dis)ability interlock and affect people's experiences (Dill & Kohlman, 2014, p. 64). Intersectionality enables understanding social categories as interdependent and interconnected, rather than distinct and exclusive, allowing for an exploration of people's unique experiences (Dill & Kohlman, 2014, p. 64). Intersectional analysis illuminates that gender is not the sole factor determining women's vulnerability, but it is in relation to race, class, and other identity categories that it dictates capabilities of reacting to climate change (Pearse, 2017, p. 3). For example, middle-class, able-bodied women are less vulnerable than those in the lower class or disabled. Through integrating intersectional lens, FPE scholars managed to challenge the

homogenous depiction of vulnerability and illuminate women's experiences as shaped by the multiple power structures beyond patriarchy.

Similarly, intersectionality helped to challenge the essentialist notions about women's virtuosity. FPE scholars have shown that women's connection and sensibility toward nature is dependent on their societal position, dismissing the idea that it is universal to all women (Kaijser & Kronsell, 2014, p. 423). A paradox about women's virtuosity was identified: despite their alleged special awareness and connection to nature, women remain excluded from decision-making bodies in climate governance (Macgregor, 2010, p. 232).

Overall, the intersectional analysis brought by the scholars of FPE illuminated the different experiences of women with vulnerability and virtuosity and their roots in unequal power relations in society. They revealed that vulnerability is not an intrinsic characteristic of women as a group, but it is socially produced. While researchers in academia acknowledged the advantages of applying intersectional lens, policy makers did not implement this approach and continue to address "gender and climate change in a linear, technocratic way" (Gonda, 2019, p. 87).

### **Ecofeminism**

Another school which provided an insightful critique of the gender-environment discourse is Ecofeminism. It specifically focuses on the simultaneous subordination of women and nature (Foster, 2021, p. 192). It contributes to the re-politicization by unveiling the construction of the narratives behind the discourse, and how they are intertwined with power structures (Kaijser & Kronsell, 2014, p. 422).

The main problem with the dominant narratives as identified by ecofeminists is the persistent link between women and nature, which is presented in binary dichotomy to rational, scientific men (Wilson, 2005, p. 334). Women are confined to nature either because of their biology or socially constructed characteristics, whereas men are seen as economic and scientific, consequently separated from nature (Foster, 2021, p. 1995). Those binaries are presented as natural and universal, which closes the debate and leads to the depoliticization of the discourse. They reveal that such narratives being based on "exaggerated differences" reinforce linear thinking about gender and naturalize patterns of women's disadvantage (MacGregor, 2010, p. 235).

To challenge the indisputability of the binaries, ecofeminists went beyond material inequalities and illuminate the construction of the narratives as shaped by power relations, which create the normative representations of women (Kaijser & Kronsell, 2014, p. 419). They revealed that the discourse is created under the patriarchy, where men have control over knowledge production and subsequently attributed the valued categories to themselves to further sustain their power (Bromley, 2012, p. 5). In this way, ecofeminists expose that the binaries are not natural or universal, but it was the patriarchal knowledge production that “has separated men from women, and culture from nature, and equated women with nature” (Estévez-Saá & Lorenzo-Modia, 2018, p. 129).

Ecofeminist revealed the negative consequences of those seemingly neutral binaries found in the simultaneous subordination of women and nature (Mellor, 1997, p. 130). Women and nature are seen as inferior and as an externality to male-dominated economic systems, which legitimizes their subjugation and exploitation (Mellor, 1997, p. 130). Subsequently, women are confined to reproduction of human species, labor force or community care, which are necessary for the functioning of the male capitalist economy (hooks, 2014, p. 41) Ecofeminists, argue that those assumptions led to the feminization of environmental responsibility, as women are seen as those in position to take care of adaptation to climate change (Bauhardt, 2013, p. 361). They reveal how the notion of virtuosity is a result of women’s subjugation and how the patriarchy and capitalism are mutually reinforcing systems working for women’s disadvantage (Acha, 2019, p. 248).

Ecofeminists revealed how associated with women nature is also placed in a subordinate position in hierarchical dichotomies, which serve as justification of its exploitation (Mellor, 1997, p. 132). They argue that it is supported by another dichotomy in which nature is seen as non-human “an inert, dead, material object”, which allows superior humans to exploit it (Estévez-Saá & Lorenzo-Modia, 2018, p. 130). Fraser (2021) revealed how these binaries are perpetuated through the capitalist system, which by treating nature as devoid of value, legitimizes the use of natural resources for its continuous expansion (p. 107). She argues that such perspective justifies capitalist extraction without any restrictions, subsequently leading to the environmental degradation (Fraser, 2021, p. 107). In this way, the simultaneous subjugation of women and nature through the patriarchal capitalist system is unveiled.

Ecofeminist analysis illuminates problematic assumptions, which “are regarded as common sense, but build on and reinforce social categorisations and structures of power” (Kaijser &

Kronsell, 2014, p. 422). Ecofeminists try to deconstruct those binaries by creating an alternative discourse based on relationality and continuity (Estévez-Saá & Lorenzo-Modia, 2018, p. 129). They appeal for incorporation of different epistemologies to reconstruct human-nature connection and challenge the dualistic understanding of gendered roles, which confines women to caretaking roles over nature (Kaijser & Kronsell, 2014, p. 419).

### **Decolonial Feminism**

Another approach relevant to re-politicization is Decolonial Feminism. It specifically focuses on how the narratives perpetuate binaries between women from the Global South and Global North.

Decolonial feminists reveal that the image of doomed by poverty, vulnerable women is almost exclusively confined to the Global South (Sasser, 2018, p. 11). Contrastingly, the pro-environmental attitudes are attributed to women from the Global North, highlighting their virtue and portraying them “as active agents in their own wellbeing” (Simon-Kumar et al., 2018, p. 247). As the most influential for this discipline author, Chandra Mohanty (2003) argued such notions presented as natural and inevitable, create a binary of backwards women from the Global South with diametrically opposed progressive Northern women, consequently perpetuating colonial hierarchies (p. 501).

Decolonial scholars explore how those narratives are constructed under power relations, in which the West has a dominant position (Sasser, 2018, p. 24). They identify this problem as coloniality of discourse, in which the West exercises power through the narratives based on “racial domination and hierarchical power relations established during active colonialism” (Sultana, 2022, p. 4). Akena (2012) explains how European colonizers, having a dominant position, imposed their world view on the colonized societies and defined Western knowledge as the only legitimate, devaluing Indigenous epistemologies, as primitive and inferior (p. 616). Scholars contend that the impacts of coloniality persist in modern times, affecting the ways we organize society and respond to environmental challenges (Akena, 2012, p. 616).

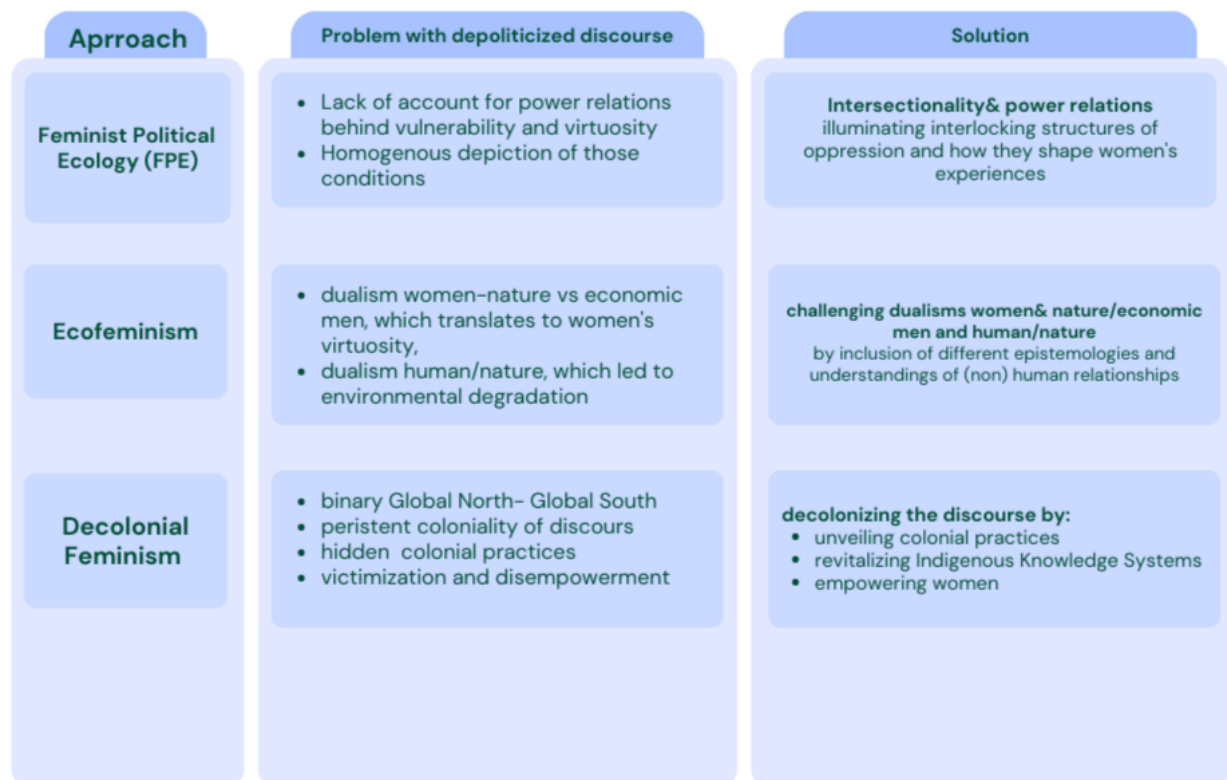
In practice, coloniality means that the dominant discursive framings are based on Eurocentric views, which are presented as universal truths (Sultana, 2022, p. 7). According to Kashwan and Ribot (2021) the West creates a narrative that obscures the historical processes of colonialism, imperialism, and dispossession that have made the Global South vulnerable (p. 326). Subsequently the discourse becomes ahistorical and depoliticized as the vulnerability of the

Global South is presented as a uniform condition decontextualized from colonialism and capitalist processes of extraction (Sultana, 2022, p. 9). Scholars reveal that such discourse not only covers the historical colonial processes but also the ongoing practices of overconsumption, neoliberal growth, and resource extraction from the Global South, which create its vulnerability (Simon-Kumar et al., 2018, p. 259).

Moreover, as the dominant narratives prioritize Western ways of knowing, other epistemologies and voices of women and marginalized groups become excluded (Simon-Kumar et al., 2018, p. 252). Consequently, the dominant depiction of oppressed, voiceless women from the Global South is a result of Western scholars' judgment who create their self-representation in its opposition (Mohanty, 2003). Decolonial feminists explored the negative consequences of those depictions, concluding that they "generate a restricted idea of vulnerability, as a passive, innocent victimhood", limiting women's agency on changing their conditions (Djouidi et. al., 2016, p. 249). They identify a paradox that such an image, which should supposedly work for the alleviation of women's disadvantaged position, renders them depoliticized and voiceless, leading to their disempowerment (Djouidi et. al., 2016, p. 249).

Decolonial feminists revealed the material, and discursive co-production of injustices (Sultana, 2021, p. 247). As a solution to this issue, they propose decolonial theory which involves revitalizing alternative epistemologies to challenge the dominant colonial narratives, through which West continues to exercise power (Kermoal & Altamirano-Jimenez, 2016, p. 6). To re-politicize the discourse, they appeal for unveiling the colonial practices which led to women's vulnerability. Finally, they aim to challenge the victimized depictions of women by amplifying their voices and acknowledging their political resistance.

**Figure 1. Critical Theory Perspective on depoliticization of the discourse on gender and environment.**



**Methodology:**

The first part of the thesis consisted of Critical Theory Perspective on depoliticization, which outlined the workings of this phenomenon and identified potential solutions for re-politicizing the discourse on gender and environment. This part laid groundwork for exploring this issue from the perspective of Indigenous Feminism, as it allows to situate this approach in existing scholarship and facilitates a systematic exploration of this complex issue.

To answer the research question a discourse analysis of two final declarations of Indigenous women's conferences will be conducted: Mandaluyong *Declaration (2010)* of the Global

Conference on Indigenous Women, Climate Change and REDD Plus, and the *Global Political Declaration of Indigenous Women (GDOIW, 2021)* signed at the Second World Conference of Indigenous Women. These conferences were chosen because they were among the biggest and most recent held so far, offering a valuable account of the political demands for a sustainable and equitable future aligned with the vision of Indigenous Feminism.

The solutions proposed by existing scholarship for re-politicizing the discourse will serve as distinct categories, enabling a systematic analysis of the declarations. The following categories (see: Figure 1) will be deployed: *intersectionality & power relations* as identified by FPE, *challenging dualisms: women & nature vs. economic men and human/vs. nature* as proposed by ecofeminists. This will be followed by categories based on decolonial feminists' quest of decolonization of the discourse by: *unveiling colonial processes, revitalizing Indigenous Knowledge Systems, empowering women*. To operationalize these categories, quotes from the conferences will be matched to each category, based on whether: Indigenous women mention their intersectional experiences and the unequal power relations which led to their vulnerability; propose an alternative to Western narratives on women and humans' connection to nature; reveal historical and ongoing colonial practices, resistance of women, respectively.

This study focuses on practical application of Indigenous Feminism, as seen in the conferences. Such a method provides a comprehensive approach to answering the research question, as it puts the conceptual solutions identified in the Critical Theory Perspective in dialogue with the real-life experiences of Indigenous Women. Exploring whether Indigenous women fill in the solutions, allows to assess whether they contribute to re-politicization of the discourse, while considering the previous accomplishments. Moreover, the discourse analysis will enable accounting for the language used by Indigenous women, revealing its relation to the social, political, and historical context in which it was created. Finally, following the plea of Indigenous Feminists: "Nothing about Us, without Us" the study will incorporate numerous quotes from the declarations to directly include their voices.



## **Analysis & Results**

### **Intersectionality & power relations**

The first problem with depoliticized discourse is that it obscures women's vulnerability from its roots in patriarchal society and unequal relations globally. Scholars acknowledged that intersectionality is crucial to reveal the interlocking structures of oppression which shape women's conditions (Djouidi et. al., 2016, p. 249).

Indigenous feminism as defined by Green (2007) is a theoretical and practical approach which provides a critique of "colonialism, racism, and sexism and the unpleasant synergies between these three violations of human rights" (p. 20). As an inherently intersectional approach, grounded in lived experiences, it could illuminate the experiences of women's vulnerability from their perspective (Acha, 2019, p. 248).

As the analysis of the declarations revealed, the conferences gather "Indigenous women with disabilities, leaders, activists and artists members of LGBTQ+" (GDOIW, 2021, p. 1). They provide a platform for participants to reveal their diverse, intersectional experiences, consequently challenging the homogenous depictions of their conditions. In the Mandaluyong Declaration (2010) the participants argue: „we are differentially affected by the impacts of climate change because we are women and because we are indigenous peoples”, highlighting their intersectional identities (p. 1). They illuminate the interlocking structures of oppression that shaped their conditions, as they argue: “we are still experiencing multiple levels of structural and systemic violence; marginalization, discrimination, and racism” (GDOIW, 2021, p. 2). They unveil their disadvantage in patriarchal society: “we hardly have access to basic social services like health and education. We suffer from violence committed against us in the forms of rape, sexual harassment, and bigotry” (Mandaluyong Declaration, 2010, p. 3). Yet, their experience with patriarchy is different from that of other women, “since it has been shaped by its link to colonial violence” (Sunseri, 2020, p. 34).

Indigenous women expose how colonialism persistently undermines their conditions. They highlight the “prevailing impact of colonization and globalization” as found in “militarization of territories, forced displacement and migration” and continued appropriation of their territories (GDOIW, 2021, p. 2). Mollet and Faria (2013) coined this special position of Indigenous women as “post-colonial intersectionality” as they situate their experiences in colonial processes unveiling how they shaped their identities over time (p.117).

Indigenous women reveal that their vulnerability to climate change is especially severe because of their reliance on the environment: “all of these have grossly affected our traditional livelihoods and well-being which are intricately linked with the integrity of our ecosystems” (Mandaluyong Declaration, 2010, p. 2). They argue that climate change is threatening their “livelihoods, shelter, culture, traditions and Indigenous medicines” (GDOIW, 2021, p. 2). Moreover, by stating that “while we have least contributed to the problem of climate change, we have to carry the burdens of adapting to its adverse impacts”, they display the global unequal relations which led to the environmental degradation. They contend that the roots of climate change are found in “the unwillingness of rich, industrialized countries to change their unsustainable production and consumption patterns” (Mandaluyong Declaration, 2010, p. 1)

As observed in the declarations, participants use explicit language to reassert their perspectives and uncover both social and global power relations, which led to their vulnerability and environmental degradation. In this way, they question the homogeneous depiction of vulnerability, and contextualize their experience in the socio-political dynamics, contributing to the re-politicization of the discourse.

### **Challenging dualisms: women & nature vs. economic men and human vs. nature**

Ecofeminists identified the problematic connection between women and nature, as portrayed in dichotomy to economic men. They appeal for challenging this dualism as it translates to essentialist assumptions of women’s virtuosity and reinforces the patriarchal division of labor, in which women are burdened with responsibility over the environment (Foster, 2021, p. 194).

When exploring the declarations, it becomes clear that the participants confine nature to women, as illustrated in the theme of their Second World conference: “Together for wellbeing and Mother Earth” and the motto: “The Earth is our mother” and “Women, all females, are a manifestation of Mother Earth in human form” (GPDOIW, 2021, p.1). Such understanding originates in Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), which are the Indigenous belief systems about relationships among humans, and “ecosystems that are required for any society to survive” (Whyte, 2017, p. 157). Although Indigenous epistemologies vary between communities, they are based on recurring values and norms around the world, allowing for their broad categorization as IKS (Sunseri, 2020, p. 30). Many IKS celebrate the connection between women and nature as “rooted in a shared ability to provide life” (Wilson, 2005, p. 350). However, such depiction is controversial as it parallels the cultural and spiritual ecofeminists’

celebration of women-nature connection, which translated to disadvantageous development programs targeting women based on their virtuosity (Gaard, 2011, p. 162).

Yet, in the declarations the women-nature connection does not imply women's exclusive responsibility over the environment. As the motto continues: "It is our responsibility to care for our mother and in caring for our mother, we care for ourselves", highlighting the responsibility of every human stemming from the relationship of reciprocity with nature (GPDOIW, 2021, p.1). Scholars argue that women-nature connection is worrisome in a "worldview in which men occupy a position that is separate from, and above, nature", which does not resonate with Indigenous epistemology (Wilson, 2005, p. 350). For many Indigenous people their relationship with nature is "based on the principles of respect, reciprocity, and obligation" (Kermaal & Altamirano-Jimenez, 2016, p. 8). For example, Wilson (2005) conducted interviews with the Anishinabek nation in Ontario, Canada and found that in their epistemology nature is seen as an active agent and that "neither Anishinabek men nor women believe that they are above nature" (p. 351). Thus, the connection of women with nature does not translate to treating them as inferior nor to gendered division of labor.

Indigenous women recognize that the dominant narratives do not resonate with their epistemologies, as they contend that their spirituality is based on different understanding of (non)human relationships: "our spirituality which links humans and nature, (..) and the living and non-living has been and remains as the foundation of our sustainable resource management" (Mandaluyong Declaration, 2010, p. 4). As observed in the motto of Mandaluyong Declaration (2010): "we must search through our past to understand the ways of our ancestors for thousands of years when they lived in unity with the spirits of the lands and mother earth", they see revitalization of their knowledge as a pathway to reconstruct the human-nature connection which was destroyed by the dominant narratives (p.1).

In conclusion, the analysis leads to ambiguous results. On the one hand, the women-nature connection as derived from IKS challenges women's exclusive responsibility and opens new ways of thinking about humans' relationship to nature as one of reciprocity. On the other hand, such connections can reinforce the notions of women's virtuosity that translate to disadvantageous programs targeted at them as seen in the past.

## **Decolonization**

Another problem identified by the scholars is the coloniality of the gender-environment discourse, which translates to its depoliticization and exclusion of other epistemologies. The dominant narratives reflect Eurocentric perspectives and interests, covering colonial processes which led to vulnerability of the women from the Global South (Kashwan & Ribot, 2021; Sultana 2022).

## **Unveiling colonial practices**

To decolonize and thereby re-politicize the discourse, decolonial scholars appeal for revealing the colonial dynamics that created the especially severe vulnerability of women from the Global South (Sultana, 2021, p. 246).

Indigenous Feminism as an inherently anti-colonial movement “confronts the dominant myths and political, social and economic practices that dignify, deny or perpetuate colonialism” (Green, 2007, p. 22). As revealed in the first section of the analysis, Indigenous women situate their experiences in historical and ongoing colonial struggles and explore their links with sexism, and environmental degradation. It is articulated in quotes like: “conflicts over ownership and access to our land and resources brought about by past and present discriminatory legal, political and economic systems, some conservation regimes and some climate change responses (..), are taking a serious toll on us” (Mandaluyong Declaration, 2010, p. 3). Moreover, the authors attribute their vulnerability to climate change to global, unequal relations, where Western "unsustainable production and consumption patterns" and neo-colonial practices of "modernity and capitalist development" contribute to the disadvantage of the Global South (Mandaluyong Declaration, 2010, p. 1). In this way, they contribute to re-politicization of the discourse as they reveal the colonial roots of their disadvantage.

## **Revitalizing IKS**

Scholars recognize the coloniality of discourse as another form of discrimination, as the dominant narratives, on which the status quo relies, reflect Western views, and exclude other epistemologies (Akena, 2012, p. 616). To address this issue, they advocate for the revaluation of other epistemologies, such as IKS, to offer alternative perspectives that could challenge the narratives on which the depoliticized discourse relies (Kermoal & Altamirano-Jimenez, 2016, p. 6).

As explored, Indigenous Women contend that the dominant narratives do not resonate with their epistemologies. Scholars found that it was with the arrival of colonizers that the connection between women and nature came to mean their simultaneous subjugation (Sunseri, 2020, p. 29). In many pre-colonial societies “Indigenous gender relations were quite egalitarian, women were valued for their roles as life-givers, carriers of cultures, and participants in the economy” (Sunseri, 2020, p. 30). As Kermoal & Altamirano-Jimenez (2016) found Indigenous societies “differentiate between the roles that women and men assume based on social interactions and survival needs of their collective society” and value both equally (p. 10). Patriarchal division of labor and devaluation of nature were imposed on their societies by colonizers, who unvalidated their epistemologies (Huhndorf & Suzack, 2010, p. 5).

Indigenous women recognize the ongoing detrimental impacts of those colonial narratives as illustrated in the quotes: “capitalist development (...) individualism, patriarchy, and incessant profit-seeking have caused climate change” and recognition of the “dominant economic paradigm which is highly extractive and destructive of nature” (Mandaluyong Declaration, 2010, p. 1). Nowadays, those colonial narratives continue to form the foundation of the capitalist- patriarchal system responsible for women’s disadvantage and the environmental crisis (MacGregor, 2020, p. 116).

Indigenous Women recognize those narratives as another form of discrimination, suppressing ‘their cosmovision, the rights of nature, and their role as environmental defenders and ancestral guardians of Mother Earth’ (GPDOW, 2021, p. 5). They argue for revitalization of IKS, as it is necessary for their self-determination and has potential to offer alternatives towards a sustainable, equitable future. As observed in the Mandaluyong Declaration (2010) ; “We believe that if we continue to live by our values and still use our sustainable systems and practices for meeting our basic needs, we can adapt better to climate change”, they see IKS as a pathway to sustainability (p. 4) Their commitment is reflected in the “priority areas of work and actions” in Mandaluyong Declaration (2010), where its participants agreed to: “Reinforce Indigenous women’s traditional knowledge on mitigation and adaptation and facilitate the transfer of this knowledge to the younger generations” (p. 6).

In this way, Indigenous Women speak to decolonial feminists, who explored the material and discursive co-production of injustices. They revealed how the colonial narratives of women’s and nature’s subjugation uphold the current state of women's disadvantage and environmental crisis. They went beyond questioning the capitalist- patriarchal system and by actively

promoting IKS they provided alternatives “to transform the economic, cultural, and political systems which are the root causes of climate change” (MacGregor, 2020, p.116). Consequently, they contribute to re-politicization of the gender-environment discourse by unveiling the colonial practices and narratives that the status quo relies on.

### **Empowering women**

Another problem with the colonial, depoliticized discourse is that it portrays vulnerable women as voiceless, passive victims. Such depiction is usually attributed to women from the Global South, who are deprived of their political agency to change their circumstances. Although, Indigenous women reside both in the Global North and South, the described depictions are confined to them, as they are not based on geographic location, but on the shared conditions of disadvantage (Mohanty, 2003, p. 505). Decolonial scholars argue that to empower women, their capacity to resist needs to be acknowledged (Sultana 2022; Mohanty 2013).

As found in the Mandaluyong Declaration (2010) Indigenous women recognizing their exclusion from the dominant gender-environment discourse, assert their perspectives and experiences, as documented in a quote: “We came to tell our stories on how we are differentially affected by the impacts of climate” (p. 1). The other objective of this conference was to recognize their “distinct contributions in mitigating climate change” and highlight their role in protecting biodiversity (Mandaluyong Declaration, 2010, p. 1). This conference created space for Indigenous women’s self-representation and for acknowledging their contributions, consequently challenging the depictions that present them as voiceless and passive.

The Second World Conference of Indigenous Women had a different objective as participants argue, the aim was to “assert our rights to self-determination and our rights to equal access to resources and opportunities” (GPDOIW, 2021, p. 4). The discourse analysis reveals the socio-political context of continuous exclusion of Indigenous women, in which they gather: “We are still far from being included in decision-making processes in all matters that impact us. As Indigenous Women, we continue to face obstacles that limit us from fully and effectively exercising our rights” (GPDOIW, 2021, p. 3). Therefore, they organized this conference under the principle “Nothing About Us, Without Us,” to create a platform where they can voice their perspectives on issues that affect them, bringing an end to their exclusion in the political realm (GPDOIW, 2021, p. 4).

Analyzing the language in the declaration reveals that the participants direct their demands at states, who continuously fail to protect their rights. The recipient was identified as most sentences start with the expression “we call on states”, for example “We call on all States to

adopt specific, inclusive and accessible measures (...) to address the conditions of Indigenous Women who experience multiple instances of intersectional discrimination and violence” (GPDOIW, 2021, p. 5).

The analysis found that the conference served to reaffirm their capacity for resistance as they argue: “Indigenous Women throughout the globe have continued working, advocating, and bringing to light the challenges that still pose a threat to us (...)” (GPDOIW, 2021, p. 2). Participants revealed their continuous struggles for political change and affirmed their vital role in advocating for a sustainable future. Consequently, they challenge the binary of Global North and South, demonstrating their capability to take political action and empowering women to advocate for the future that they envision.

Finally, Indigenous women conclude by calling for a “power shift, where the paternalistic and racist approach would be replaced by one of equitable collaboration” (GPDOIW, 2021, p. 5). They invite non-indigenous people, the UN bodies, states, and anyone interested to form alliances to change the socio-economic system, which leads to environmental degradation and subjugation of women. They reveal that their demands reach beyond the advancement of their own rights, advocating for a sustainable, equitable future for everyone (GPDOIW, 2021, p. 5). The interconnectedness between patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, and environmental degradation revealed in the declarations, exposes the fact that social and environmental justice movements share common goals and could unite in the alliances proposed by Indigenous Feminists.

## **Discussion:**

The results of the discourse analysis reveal that Indigenous Feminism can effectively re-politicize the discourse on gender and environment.

The conferences organized by Indigenous women, demonstrate their active contribution to re-politicization of the discourse, as they gather to reassert their perspectives, challenging the essentialist notions of vulnerability and virtuosity, on which the discourse relies. The study preserves their voices in the first person, and through extensive use of quotes, illuminates how by reaffirming their political agency and perspectives, Indigenous women bring the discourse back to the political realm.

As observed in each category, they enacted theoretical solutions proposed by existing scholarship, providing a comprehensive approach to re-politicization. Firstly, by revealing their intersectional experiences under patriarchy, colonialism, and global capitalism, Indigenous

women challenge the homogenous depictions of women's vulnerability and contextualize them in the unequal power relations in the society and globally. Secondly, as an inherently anti-colonial movement they reveal the historical and ongoing colonial practices. They not only expose the material injustices but also the discursive ones, found in enduring impacts of colonial narratives of women's and nature's subjugation that uphold the current state of women's disadvantage and environmental crisis.

Additionally, IKS that form the foundation of Indigenous Feminism were examined for their potential to challenge the essentialist women- nature connection, which translates to assumptions of their virtuosity and responsibility over the environment. It was discovered that Indigenous understanding of interconnectedness between all humans and nature can contribute to challenging the notions of women's exclusive responsibility. Nonetheless, this section was inconclusive, as the Indigenous understanding of the women-nature connection can be instrumentalized to reinforce the assumption of women's virtuosity.

Finally, as Indigenous women gather to fight for their rights and political change, they automatically bring the discourse back to the political realm, challenging the depictions of passive, victimized women from the Global South. By expressing their demands and endorsing the principle "Nothing about Us, without Us", they reaffirm their political agency over their circumstances.

These findings hold significant importance as they contribute to challenging the depoliticized discourse, which by portraying women's vulnerability and virtuosity as inherent, perpetuates the status quo of their disadvantage. By revealing the socio-political dynamics behind women's experiences, re-politicization brings the discourse back to the arena of public debate, where the status quo responsible for those conditions can be questioned. Indigenous women illuminate how capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy mutually shape women's circumstances, enhancing the understanding of the existing socio-economic system, responsible for women's disadvantage and environmental degradation. Such understanding shifts the focus to the systemic root causes of women's conditions, rather than their effects, paving the way for a system change, necessary for a genuine transformation to a sustainable, equitable future.

Finally, re-politicization fosters collective action, as women's conditions are no longer seen as unchangeable and fixed, rendering them back agency over their circumstance. Indigenous women portray social, environmental and gender justice as interconnected, and by showcasing women's capacity to act they empower them to unite and fight for the future that they envision.



## **Conclusion:**

Through application of Critical Theory Perspective to examine declarations from conferences of Indigenous women, this study revealed that Indigenous Feminism is a productive approach in re-politicizing the discourse on gender and environment.

As an intersectional approach, grounded in lived experiences of colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism, it illuminates the diversity of women's experiences and contextualizes them in socio-political dynamics. Bringing together two critiques: feminist and anti-colonial, it reveals the social and global unequal power relations and narratives, which led to women's vulnerability and environmental degradation. Finally, as an inherently political movement, it automatically redirects the discourse to the political realm and challenges women's victimized portrayals. It renders political agency back to women, and empowers them to advance social, environmental, and gender justice.

These findings make a significant contribution to academia, by revealing the productivity of usually dismissed Indigenous Feminism, they open a new pathway towards re-politicization. The project's strength lies in integrating various theoretical approaches and creating dialogue between them and Indigenous Feminist practice. This not only informs scholars about the practical application of their solutions but also situates this novel approach within the broader context of existing scholarship.

Based on these findings, incorporating Indigenous Feminism could contribute to scholars' project of establishing a re-politicized discourse that effectively acknowledges women's experiences rooted in their political foundations. Such re-politicized discourse challenges the existing status quo system that created women's disadvantage and environmental degradation. In this way, it contributes to an understanding of the systemic changes, required to successful transformations towards a sustainable and equitable future. Moreover, women's conditions would no longer be portrayed as unchangeable, rendering them agency back to fight for the future that they envision. Finally, such discourse would include the voices of the previously marginalized, letting the vulnerable women to speak for themselves, and address their needs and capacities adequately.

While the results of the analysis were conclusive, this project is limited by its reliance on only two declarations and a uniform understanding of Indigenous epistemologies. Some scholars argue that the term "Indigenous Feminisms" is more appropriate than a singular form, as it captures the diversity of epistemologies from which this approach is derived (Suzack, 2015, p. 261). The variety of epistemologies between Indigenous communities, translates to different

understandings and perspectives among Indigenous women. This study confined Indigenous epistemologies to broad Indigenous Knowledge Systems, potentially oversimplifying the experiences and claims of Indigenous women. By focusing on the major global conferences, it aimed to include Indigenous women from different backgrounds and communities. However, the findings were based solely on the conference participants, which affects their generalizability.

Future studies could enhance the analysis by incorporating more declarations and insights from diverse epistemologies, providing a deeper understanding of Indigenous women's political demands and their experiences. The most important is to endorse the principle "Nothing about us, without us" by directly involving perspectives of Indigenous women in the studies. By embracing this principle, the risk of depoliticization can be successfully mitigated.

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