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Heat and Light: Interdisciplinary Feminist Contributions to Environmental Ethics, Politics, and Movements

For the past thirty years, feminist environmental scholars have made important contributions to environmental thought. Working from a critical position on the margins of the mainstream disciplines of political science, philosophy, geography, and sociology, they have developed a set of theoretical and evidence-based claims about the relationship between gender inequality and environmental crisis that now shape public policy in important, if not always obvious, ways. Various labels such as “ecofeminism,” “feminist environmentalism,” and “eco-gender studies,” the common denominator of this body of scholarship is the analysis that social oppression and environmental exploitation are inextricably linked to fundamental social constructs that have co-evolved with patriarchal power relations. Scholars have provided evidence of material, structural, and ideational links between the degradation of the ecosphere and power asymmetries between men and women. They have mapped out the gender differences in the ways people perceive, experience, and respond to environmental problems in a broad range of contexts. These insights have been taken up by many practitioners and policy makers, most notably those with connections to United Nations agencies where the concept of “gender mainstreaming” (i.e., making gender a central concern in policy research, design, and implementation) is now becoming central to the environmental agenda. My project will trace the evolution of what has often been dismissed as a marginal critique into a mainstream principle that now shapes policy at national and global levels.

The title of my project—*Heat and Light*—hints at its overarching aim: to challenge the assumption within academic environmental circles that feminist environmental ideas generate more heat than light, that they make people angry but don't provide answers. As I have written in a recent article in *Contemporary Political Theory* (2009), there has been a “frosty reception” to gender analysis in the environmental social sciences and humanities because ecofeminism has been caricatured as un-academic and irrational. One popular textbook on environmental politics (now in its third edition) states that

“ecofeminism has made only a limited contribution to [the field] because it offers no coherent vision of a green society and no clear strategy for feminist environmental action.” With this statement, the philosophically sophisticated ecofeminist critiques of patriarchal-capitalism, and of the masculine bias within the field of environmental politics itself, are swept away. I argue that the academic field of environmental politics suffers as a result of this misreading of ecofeminism; it clearly lags behind its counterparts in the world of policy making who have put gender on the environmental agenda. And so, I want to embrace *both the heat* (i.e., the critiques that make some people angry) *and the light* (i.e., the insights and visions about how things might be different) that radiate from feminist research into environmental ethics, politics and movements, to demonstrate its important contributions these fields.