



## Ecofeminism and Political Communication: A Philosophical Assessment of Wangari Maathai's Contribution

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### ABSTRACT

Our aim is to examine ecofeminism as a significant contribution of gender studies to the global quest for environmental sustainability and political communication. We argue in support of Wangari Mathaai's position on the role of women and their relationship to the environment and political communication especially in African environment and traditional politics to show her contributions to a richer understanding of the environment, policy formulation and communication within African circle. In the history of African philosophy and political philosophy, very few Voices of Women Contributions (VWC) to professional philosophy and political communication are being heard. Some blame this on systemic marginalization of women while others regard it as unintended. Balogun and Fayemi for example, posit that "the under representation of women in general African philosophical space is an unintended case of marginalization, there is relatively significant women authorship identities in African environmental discourses" (2018, 103). However, whether intended or not, it is the objective of this paper to show that women (African women) can play and have been playing very important roles both in environmental conservation and in political communication. In the sub-Saharan Africa, men demonstrate chauvinism not only to women but to the environment which is why it is too common to observe that women are the ones who plant economic trees for example, and men are the ones who fall them (Balogun and Fayemi 2018, 111). The brash treatment of nature by men in Africa led to what Workineh Kelbessa (2018) called 'biodiversity loss' in many African countries. Secondly, the chapter attempts to assess the contributions of Maathai and to show that although women have been subordinated in some African place, they nonetheless have been a strong force by playing significant role not only in maintaining feminist struggles but most importantly, in promoting environmentally-friendly management of natural resources in some parts of Africa. We contend that Maathai's significant contributions display Voice of Women Contribution (VWC) by empowering women both in environment and politics in some African places. I attempted to show the nexus between African women, the environment and political communication. I thereby, recommend that African women should empower themselves both in politics and the environment like Maathai in order to challenge the chauvinism of the African society that perpetuate their exploitation and neglect in some African place.

**Keywords:** Right to vote, the ballot, tertiary institutions & Nigerian democracy

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The question is: why should African (s) or African philosophers care about their African environment? Is it the duty of women to care about their environment? What roles have women to play in adding value to their environment and politics in the society? Is the environment actually neglected and marginalized? In the recent decades, research outputs have shown that the environment has been neglected, marginalized and left for women in Western scholarship. The African place is not an exception.



In Africa, this could be as a result of the patriarchal nature of African societies where men dominate the social sphere and extend the same dominance to the environment and politics. In this paper, we argue against the unconcern for, and subjugation of, women both in the environment and politics by menfolk in the African place where the environment is still very much neglected by governments, corporate bodies and academics. The entrenched traditional world-views which privileged men over women and humans over the environment make it difficult for the modern day challenges posed by the neglect of these issues to become obvious. In contemporary society, where deep-rooted cultural and religious practices make it difficult to determine human conduct toward environment and politics, it raises a challenging puzzle in the society. The main purpose of this paper is to establish that ecofeminism is a feminist approach to politically communicate environmental issues in the society. Therefore, the study shows the delicate line between women in Africa and the environment in the light of ecofeminism and political communication using the contributions of the Kenyan feminist environmentalist, Maathai as a framework.

Ecofeminism is our conceptual framework which we are using to show how it has encouraged women participation in politics. We shall also note that through ecofeminism, political communication is achievable and sustained in some African society. Ecofeminism is a philosophical doctrine that looks at the ecological and feminist concerns and draws a relationship between them from a common history of domination by men. Within Africa, ecofeminism serve as a pathway through which feminist politically communicate environmental issues in the society. Our argument will be that there is a connection between African women, the environment and politics which comes from their shared history of oppression and domination by men in a patriarchal and chauvinistic system. This position is corroborated by Maathai who in her publications and activism established the dire condition of the environment in Africa. The central objective of the paper is to assess Maathai's contributions to ecofeminism and political communication in African. The paper is divided into six sections. The first section is the introduction and the second, is definition of concepts. The third, section is the upshot of feminism in African while the fifth section deals the impact of Maathai's contribution to ecofeminism and political communication in Africa and finally, the conclusion.

## 2. DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS

What is ecofeminism? Ecofeminism is a philosophical theory or movement that seeks to combine ecological concerns with feminist ones, to reject or fight against male domination in the society. It is also an activist and academic movement that seek to fashion out critical or rigorous connections that exist between the domination of nature and the exploitation of women in the society. The origin of ecofeminism could be trace back to Francois d'Eaubonne, a French feminist scholar and author of *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* (Feminism or Death), published in 1974. It was translated to English in 1989. Other scholars like Susan Griffin and Mary Daly have also done something in relation to ecofeminism but did not use the word 'ecofeminism'. Their works were very significant to ecofeminism, even though neither woman used the term in their works (Mukherjee 2013, 2). However, the movement grew between 1980s and 1990s among women. Mukherjee defines Ecological feminism or Ecofeminism;

as an interdisciplinary movement which represents the synthesis of the radical movement in ecology and feminism. It is a movement that calls for a new way of thinking about nature, politics, and spirituality. Ecofeminism theory questions or rejects previously held patriarchal paradigms and holds that the domination of women by men is intimately linked to the destruction of the environment (2013, 2).

From the forgoing, Mukherjee seems to argue that Ecofeminism seeks to represent a radical union between ecology movement, or what has been called 'deep ecology', and feminism. Ariel Salleh defines Eco-feminism as a recent development in feminist thought which argues that the current global environmental crisis is a predictable outcome of patriarchal culture (1988, 26-31). Scholars like Warren (1990) and Zimmerman *et al* (1993), Behrens (2018) explain that radical ecology sees environmental crisis as rooted in anthropocentrism that presumes humans to be above nature which is then exploited for unending growth and development through modern science and technology.

Ecofeminism is a response to the perception that both women and the environment have been devalued in Western capitalist patriarchy (Muthuki 2006, 1). Ecofeminism from an African point of view can be defined as a resistance to Western imperialism and its legacy within African culture. Ecofeminist theory claim that industrialization and capitalism have resulted in the oppression of both women and nature.



What is political communication? Graber defined political communication to encompass the construction, sending, receiving, and processing of messages that potentially have a significant direct or indirect impact on politics (2005, 479). By implication the message senders or message receivers may be politicians, journalists, members of interest groups, or private, unorganized citizens. What then is the content of this message? What could be the political effect of this message to the receiver? These are questions Graber did not address. She stresses that “The key element is that the message has a significant political effect on the thinking, beliefs, and behaviors of individuals, groups, institutions, and whole societies and the environments in which they exist” (Graber, 1993, 305). Scholars like Denton & Woodward (1990), Hahn (2003), Perloff (1998) also argue in line with Graber that the message must have a political effect on the actor and factor involved. Denton and Woodward emphasized that the crucial factors that make communication ‘political’ is not the source of a message [or, we might add, referring back to their earlier emphasis on ‘public discussion’, its form], but its content and purpose (1990, 11).

Pippa Norris defines Political communications as an interactive process concerning the transmission of information among politicians, the news media and the public (2004, 1). He explains that the process operates down-wards from governing institutions towards citizens, horizontally in linkages among political actors, and also upwards from public opinion towards authorities (2004, 1). Brain McNairn posits that political communication is about politics as it relates to: (1) all forms of communication undertaken by politicians and other political actors for the purpose of achieving specific objectives; (2) Communication addressed to these actors by non-politicians such as voters and newspaper columnists; (3) Communication about these actors and their activities, as contained in news reports, editorials, and other forms of media discussion of politics (2011, 4). The question is what actually is being communicated? What are the content of the message? When is the right time to pass this message to the society? Who are the target audience? What means/method is used to communicate this message?

A critical look at the two concepts, reviews that ecofeminism is an approach which has helped some African women to develop interest in politics and educate their fellow women on the need to be part and parcel of the environment in order to be active in the political activities that plays around the environment. Thus, ecofeminism serve as a platform to boost political communication in some African society. For example the formation of GBM by Maathai is a means of developing the political careers of some African women. On the other hand, it could be argued that through GBM an institution that can achieve political communication could be established (Eweka, Motoso and Olukotun 2017, 3). Through this institution, women will be educated to understand their role both in relation to the environment and politics. Thus, within the frame work of ecofeminism, it becomes easier to achieve political communication in the society through the effort of women. But the question is what means/methods of communication will they use to achieve effective political communication within the frame work of ecofeminism?

### 3. THE UPSHOT OF FEMINISM IN AFRICAN PLACE

Feminism is a Western construct in attempt to solve the problem of men supremacy in the West. Diverse theories have been formulated and various positions taken. Some scholars are unapologetic about being called “feminists”, “humanists”, “motherists” or African feminists (Udofia, 2012). However, despite the differences in concepts used what seems common among the scholars is their concern for women’s condition, as they draw attention to the continued domination and subjugation of women in the society. Furthermore, most of the “Great Philosophers” have produced books, passage, projects and long essays or even whole treatise, where they explicitly explain the “natural” superiority of men and inferiority of women (Sandra and Merrilla, 2004). In other words, they are adopting Aristotle’s position that it is the “male element” that has full human element. By implication, Aristotle holds that women are nothing else but matter set in motion by and for the soul of the unified male, for the end of the (male) species (Sandra and Merrilla, xi). Hence, Sandra and Merilla said Aristotle portrays a man as a virtuous being if he attempts to dominate a woman and compel her to be obedient to him, and a man who treats a woman as an equal would be acting in a shameful manner (xi).

According to Echole, the struggle to overcome the supremacy of male began by organizing Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) (2007) in the West. This movement was a gateway to free women oppression and domination in the society. Its aim is to reduce male supremacy over women. It serves as a means through which women scrutinize social beliefs about gender, human nature, home duties, sexual ethics, epistemic credibility, and even rationality. Philosophy has provided vital means, such as methods of conceptual analysis and traditions of critique that have allowed feminist scholars to subject cultural traditions and dogma about gendered entity and gender relations to objective, fair, but uncompromising examination (Alcoff and Kitty, 2007). Based on this, most radical feminists argue that women constituted a sex-class, which relation between women and men needed to be recast in society (Echols, 2007, 3).



However, in some traditional African societies, the case is different, some women are very comfortable with the position granted to them. Some women see every position given to them by men as their rightful place without question. This is why women are not part of decision making in some traditional African societies but they are not complaining. But in contemporary African society today, the situation has changed. This is as a result of Western orientation and education which some African women have received. Having been trained in Western education and orientation for a long period they learned that women cannot just be neglected in all aspects of life in some African societies. For the returnee African women, it is wrong for men not to allow them in decision making in society. Thus, African feminist (women) saw this as basic form of domination from which all other types of domination by male follows. For example, domination of the environment and politics by men in some African nations is therefore, another manifestation of male domination. Ecofeminism being an expression of a stage in which constant evolutionary movement of feminism has gained a greater attention in recent years. This is as a result of efforts made by some feminists like Wangari Maathai, Sophie Oluwole, and many others. The major target of Ecofeminism is to serve as a frame work for political communication in the African place. The aim of this is to combat deforestation, desertification, water crises, and environmental pollution, encourage participation in politics. Hence, it makes the Voice of Women Contributions (VWC) very effective in contemporary African society and preventing environmental destruction, women domination, male supremacy and male element as the only existing element in the society.

#### **4. AN INSIGHT INTO MAATHAI'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO ECOFEMINISM AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN AFRICA**

Wangari Muta Maathai was a Kenyan ecofeminist and political activist, who was born in Nyeri, a rural area of Kenya (Africa). Maathai has written many works that addressed issues of ecofeminism and political communications, but in this section we shall focus on some of her contributions in preserving the environment and encouraging women participate in politics by communicating the need for voter's education, party politicking and political participation. Some of her major contribution to ecofeminism which has led women to effectively participation in politics from grassroots level to national level is as follows: (1) formation of Green Belt Movement (GBM) to develop women relationship and self-esteem in preparation for political activities in Africa (2) building team work spirit among women in order to participate effectively in preserving the environment and in politics, (3) active participation of women in politics and environment, (4) to show the importance of women education in Africa, (5) to show that culture has an important role to play in preserving the environment and sustaining political ideology. Were these contributions able to improve the conditions of African women in area of preserving the environment and political participation? In this section, we shall assess these issues from Maathai's stand point and show how it has encouraged African women to preserve African ecosystem and participate actively in African politics.

The first contribution was to form Green Belt Movement (GBM) to develop African women relationship and build their self-esteem in preparation for political participation in the society. Through formation of GBM she developed African women relationship and self-esteem. So, the formation of GBM was to build an inter-collective African women relationship and self-esteem in some African societies. Maathai explains that her major interest in forming GBM was to boost self-confidence in African women through civic education. Through this means she empowered women in the community and made community mobilization for women activities very easy (2004, 68-69). In her book titled 'Replenish the Earth' she tried to show how she started her work in the GBM with a focus on saving trees, the environment and communicate this idea in some African women. Eventually, she noticed the need to increase women's self-confidence, in order to help them to find their authentic voice, and expand democratic space so that their voices could be heard (2010, 14).

In Chapter seven of 'Replenish the Earth', she discussed 'Self-Empowerment', focusing on improving one's own life through self-reliance and committing oneself to selfless service for the common good to drive home her message she emphasized that the power to change is within yourself (2010, 15, 130). To substantiate Maathai's position, Presbey explained that her goal is not to foster narrow, self-interested behavior even though responsibility rests with the individual for the common good of the community (2013, 279). Presbey further argues that we cannot presume that individuals are suddenly going to gain self-confidence on their own and then join a group. Self-empowerment grows best in a context of group support (2013, 279). Some scholars may ask; what kind of relationship does she intend to build in African women? Maathai's aim of establishing GBM was an attempt to develop a kind of balance relationship among women. She discovered that women have low self-esteem and self-confidence within themselves and with the group. So there is need to find a way to boost their self-relation and the group-relation.





Thus, the formation of GBM becomes a pathway out of the predicament in some African nations. Within the GBM, she was able to develop a complementary relationship among some African women and some political organisations. Through constant political communication to the individuals and the groups by the means of mass media, newspapers, conferences, workshops and one-on-one communication with individuals and the group she creates awareness among them. To what extent could her GBM achieve good women relationship? To an extent her GBM achieved a good women relationship by pulling women from different ethnic groups to unite, communicate and advocate for common goal in relation to environmental and political issues in some African societies. Through this GBM she was able to build team work spirit among some African women. Thus, this aids women to politically communicate environmental issues in the society. Why was her GBM meant for only women? We think she decided to focus on women because she felt that women are marginalised both in politics and environmental issues. Hence, she needed a platform that could make women active and vibrant both in politics and in conserving the environment. To an extent her GBM achieved it.

The Second contribution was building team work spirit among Africa women in order to participate actively in politics and in preserving the environment. Maathai explains the importance of team work within groups first and then came to appreciate the fact that belonging to a group is not enough but the individual need to practice what he/she had learnt from the group to develop him/herself in the society. Hence, the individual must internalize the positive messages he/she hears in the group in order to have courage to act alone or with others. But then, she went back to the group experience and realized she had to build within the group learning experiences that paid particular attention to the need for growth in self-confidence of each individual person (2013, 279).

Maathai emphasizes that by joining together, African women can change their world for the better. Participating in politics is just one way, and not the only or best way, of becoming politically active. Anytime people come together for concerted action to change their world, it is an example of 'political action' in the broad sense. I think that establishment of GBM as a women group is a veritable political communication avenue for African women. This is why Kushner argued that GBM is a kind of program that helps some women in communities to understand the linkages between environmental degradation, poor governance, and educate people to participate in democracy. They address the root causes of environmental and social problems by teaching about relationships between colonialism, poverty, racism, and capitalist (date visited 06/06/2018, 195).

The Third contribution of Maathai to ecofeminism and political communication in some Africa countries is that through her GBM she made some African women to be active in politics like being a member of political party, being active in electoral process and electoral protest. According Aili Mari Tripp, some African women became active in politics in the 1990s. She explains that women's extensive experience in associations like GBM, churches, savings clubs, community improvement associations, and NGOs helped to prepare them for political work. Tripp also notes that once they entered politics, women were fierce opponents of corruption, patronage, and ethnic division they found in the existing political systems (Tripp 2004, 144, 151–152). For Worthington (2003) the media coverage of politically active women tends to portray women as unnecessarily aggressive and ill-equipped to lead. How does he arrive at this conclusion?

What is the yardstick for measuring those ill-equipped leaders in some African societies? Are the women in question African women? I think this is not true because, in Africa today issues concerning the environment and politics are communicated through small groups like GBM, pressure group, action group NGO etc. All these groups are granted media coverage. Their political active does not show sign of unnecessary aggressiveness in Africans within GBM. Worthington conclusion might have been drawn from Western women experience in the societies, not African women.

And this is one of the problems, according to Presbey, that Maathai attempted to solve by forming GBM to encourage African women and develop them with the ability and capacity to lead from a small group to a large group (2013, 277). Through these groups she was able to attain what Popoola referred to as late evolution of political communication (2017, 15). The fourth contribution of Maathai to ecofeminism and political communication is her ability to show the importance of women education in some African societies. This is also in line with Presbey's (2013) view that girl's education will raise the country's Gross Domestic Product significantly and that it is through sound education that one can communicate and participates actively in politics.



The fifth contributions of Maathai are her attempt to show that African traditional culture plays essential role in preserving the environment. She argues that there is need for Africans to preserve their traditional culture that when traditional cultures are destroyed by Westernism, Africans are left with the 'gods of commercialism, materialism, and individualism', which leave both stomachs and souls empty (2009, 164). There are many African cultural practices that preserve the environment like the practice of the evil forest, the worship of some animals, trees and mountains. African women play vital roles in persevering traditional African cultures like making sure that children do not farm or cut woods from the evil forest, that worship of some of the animals are sustained for example in Benue state (Nigeria) the worship of green snake is sustained by women. The traditional African culture also encourages women to participate actively in politics. For example, in Igbo-African traditional society the formation of small group like '*Umuada*' (daughters of the land) and '*Ugosimba*' (those married to the community). Within these groups in the traditional African society women learn how to participate in politics like what Maathai called the GBM.

After critical look at these contributions made by Maathai, some scholars still concludes that it is insignificant to ecofeminism and political communication in Africa. The reasons for this conclusion in Africa are as follows: the patriarchal nature of the African society, perhaps because of the means through which they communicate their message to the society, or where the women place their messages might also contribute to that, the types of tools used by women achieve their goal might be another factor, the type of Western-oriented, formal education and Christian religion Africans inherited from their Western colonizers, lack of early education for women in some African societies and, the perception of a woman as a housewife and child bearing machine in many African traditional societies. All these make it difficult to see women contributions to ecofeminism and political communication feasible. Even the contributions of a few women such as Maathai who manage to break the jinx are not taken seriously.

From the forgoing, we think that what Maathai is advocating for, will also create a problem of women domination over men. If men had made the mistake by dominating women in the society, should be repeated again? This is because focusing on only women in the society will eventually lead to a sort of domination by women when they are fully empower and men are less empowered, the women will in turn dominate men in the society. Therefore, Maathai aim should not be to reciprocate the same orientation towards men but to establish a balance where there will be no domination from any side but a complementary relationship should exist between the two. There should be a social equilibrium where men and women will have a complementary relationship that is free of any kind of domination from the society. This will help to communicate political and environmental issues effectively in the society.



## 5. CONCLUSION

In the preceding pages of this paper, we have attempted to assess the contribution of Maathai to ecofeminism and political communication in African society. It is true that Maathai has really made significant contributions in Africa, but she was still a Western product with Western influence. Some of her contributions were more of Western ideas and not really Africa ideas. From the formation of her GBM to education and politics reflect more of Western ideas not African ideas with the exception of traditional African culture which reflect more of African ideas. Nevertheless, it was a good attempt for her to show that African women have a lot to contribute in preserving the African environment and making African politics attractive. We contend with her, that it is only being a member of a group, be it political, economic, academic or environmental that an individual can achieve his/her aim very fast. An individual can achieve his/her goal as an individual but not as fast as an individual who belongs to a group. Hence, the group must not be only women, it must represent all gender in the society, for it to be fruitful, active and communicate environmental and political issues in the society effectivel



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