GENDER AND ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE IN AFRICA: RETHINKING BIODIVERSITY AND PUBLIC HEALTH THROUGH AN ETHICS OF CARE AND INCLUSION

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Abstract

Africa continues to face an ecological crisis marked by biodiversity loss, deforestation, climate change, environmental pollution, and the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources. These challenges threaten ecological sustainability and the livelihoods of communities whose survival depends largely on the natural environment. However, the effects of ecological degradation are not felt equally, as women and other vulnerable groups bear a disproportionate burden because of their roles in agriculture, food production, water management, and the preservation of indigenous ecological knowledge. Despite their significant contributions to biodiversity conservation, women remain largely excluded from environmental governance and decision-making. This article examines the relationship between gender and ecological justice in Africa by rethinking biodiversity through an ethics of care and inclusion. It argues that biodiversity conservation should be understood not merely as an environmental or scientific concern but as an ethical responsibility rooted in relationality, solidarity, and respect for the interconnectedness of all life. The article further contends that ecological justice requires the meaningful inclusion of women and local communities, whose knowledge and experiences are indispensable to sustainable biodiversity conservation. The paper used analytical and critical methods and concludes that an ethics of care and inclusion provides a viable moral basis for promoting ecological stewardship, gender justice, and sustainable development in Africa.

Keywords: Gender, Ecological Justice, Biodiversity, Ethics of Care, Inclusion

Introduction

Biodiversity is not only a cornerstone of ecological health but also a critical component of sustainable development, particularly in Africa, where diverse ecosystems provide livelihoods and cultural identity. "The most alarming of all man's assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers, and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials.[1] "This pollution is, for the most part, irrecoverable; the chain of evil it initiates not only in the world that must support life but in living tissues is, for the most part, irreversible."[2] "In this now universal contamination of the environment, chemicals

[1]Rachel Carson (1962). *Silent Spring*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston. p. 6
[2]Ibid.

are the sinister and little recognised partners of radiation in changing the very nature of the world, the very nature of its life."[3] Africa today stands at the intersection of two deeply interconnected crises: ecological degradation and human vulnerability. Across the continent, communities continue to face the devastating consequences of climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental pollution, food insecurity, and fragile public health systems. From oil pollution in the Niger Delta to desertification in the Sahel and recurring floods across different African regions, the environment is increasingly a site of suffering and inequality. Yet these ecological problems are not experienced equally. Women, children, rural dwellers, and economically marginalised populations often bear the heaviest burdens of environmental decline because their daily survival is closely tied to land, water, forests, and local ecosystems.[4]

In many African societies, women play central roles in farming, water collection, food preservation, caregiving, and the transmission of indigenous ecological knowledge. They are often the first to confront the consequences of ecological disruption when crops fail, water sources become contaminated, or diseases spread through polluted environments. Despite this reality, women and vulnerable groups remain insufficiently represented in environmental governance, policy formation, and public health decision-making.[5] This imbalance reveals that ecological degradation is not only an environmental problem but also a question of justice, inclusion, and human dignity. The growing loss of biodiversity in Africa further intensifies public health challenges. Deforestation, habitat destruction, and uncontrolled extraction of natural resources contribute to the spread of infectious diseases, food shortages, malnutrition, and unsafe living conditions. Ecological destruction weakens the delicate balance between humans and nature, creating conditions where both ecosystems and human communities become increasingly fragile.[6] Consequently, public health cannot be separated from environmental sustainability, just as environmental sustainability cannot be separated from social justice.

This article advocates for a rethinking of biodiversity through an ethics of care and inclusion, proposing that gender perspectives are essential in addressing ecological justice. By integrating an ethics of care, we can foster more inclusive and effective environmental policies that recognise the vital role of women in conservation and resource management. It argues that addressing Africa's ecological crisis requires more than scientific or technological interventions alone. It demands an ethical rethinking of how human beings relate to one another and to the natural world. An ethics of care and inclusion offers a valuable ground for such reflection because it emphasises

[3]Ibid.

[4]Mery Banik and Md. Kamal Uddin (2025). "Environmental degradation and human rights challenges for coastal populations in Bangladesh". Retrieved from Discover Global Society. https://doi.org/10.1007/s44282-025-00268-4

[5]Wangari Muta Maathai (2009). *The challenge for Africa*. Pantheon Books, New York. p. 253.

[6]World Health Organisation (2015). *Connecting Global Priorities: Biodiversity and Human Health*. Geneva: WHO and Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

relationality, mutual responsibility, compassion, interdependence, and attentiveness to vulnerability. Rather than viewing nature merely as a resource for exploitation, the ethics of care invites a vision of ecological stewardship rooted in solidarity and respect for life.[7]

Conceptual Clarifications

Gender and Gender Justice

Gender refers not merely to biological distinctions between male and female persons, but also to the social, cultural, political, and economic meanings societies attach to those differences. "Gender is a term that has psychological and cultural rather than biological connotations; if the proper terms for sex are 'male' and 'female', the corresponding terms for gender are 'masculine' and 'feminine'; ... Gender is the amount of masculinity or femininity found in a person. while there are mixtures of both in many humans, the normal male has a preponderance of masculinity and the normal female a preponderance of femininity."[8] What Ann meant is that sex is a biological distinction, whereas gender is a matter of culture. Gender Justice entails ending the inequalities between women and men that are produced and reproduced in the family, the community, the market and the state.[9]

> Gender justice is a concept that promotes the full realisation of rights and opportunities for all genders. It seeks to realise equality between men and women, as well as between diverse gender identities, in terms of rights, responsibilities, and opportunities. It is a holistic approach that addresses the root causes of gender discrimination and ensures that women and other gender minorities are not excluded from the full enjoyment of their human rights.[10]

In many African societies, gender roles have historically shaped patterns of labour, leadership, access to resources, and participation in decision-making. While these roles may contribute to social organisation, they can also create systems of inequality when one gender is excluded from opportunities, recognition, or social power. Gender justice, therefore, seeks to ensure fairness, dignity, participation, and equal access to social and environmental resources for all, regardless of sex or social status. Within the context of ecological justice, gender is an important category because environmental crises affect men and women differently. "With the violation of nature is linked the violation and marginalisation of women, especially in the third world. Women produce and reproduce life not merely biological, but also through their social role in providing sustenance."[11] Women in rural African communities often depend directly on forests, rivers, and

[7] Carol Gilligan (1982). *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development.* Library of Congress Cataloguing In Publication Data, USA. P. 63

[8] Ann Oakley (1972). *Sex, Gender and Society.* Maurice Temple Smith Ltd, Australia. P.159

[9] UNIFEM (2010). "Gender Justice: Key to Achieving the Millennium Development Goals". Retrieved from https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2010/1/gender-justice-key-to-achieving-the-millennium-development-goals. Sourced 19/05/2026.

[10] SAHR (Strategy Advocacy for Human Rights). (2024). "What is Gender Justice?" Retrieved from https://www.wearesahr.org/blog/what-is-gender-justice#:~: text=Gender%20justice% 20is%20a%20 concept,rights%2C%20responsibilities%2C%20and%20opportunities. Sourced 19/05/2026

[11] Vandana Shiva (1989). *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Zed Books, London. P. 42.

agricultural land for family survival. As primary caregivers and food providers in many households, they are disproportionately affected by water scarcity, deforestation, pollution, and climate-related disasters.[12] Yet despite their intimate knowledge of environmental sustainability, women remain underrepresented in ecological governance and public policy. Gender justice in this sense involves not only equal rights but also the recognition of women's experiences, indigenous knowledge, and contributions to environmental stewardship.

Ecological Justice

Ecological justice is a concept within environmental moral philosophy that emphasises the fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens among all living beings, including humans, animals, and ecosystems. It seeks to "understand how the logic of a given problem can be linked to social justice issues."[13] Cynthia further explained that ecological justice recognises that all living beings, including humans and the natural environment, have an inherent right to fair and equitable treatment and that it emphasises the interconnectedness of social justice and environmental sustainability, and indicates its ethical responsibility to protect the environment while ensuring the well-being of humans, other species, and the natural world.[14] In other words, ecological justice concerns the ethical relationship between human beings and the natural environment. It concerns fairness in the distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, as well as moral responsibility toward ecosystems and biodiversity. Therefore, ecological justice challenges exploitative attitudes that treat nature merely as an object for economic gain without regard for the consequences on human well-being and ecological balance.

In Africa, ecological justice is deeply connected to questions of poverty, development, and survival. Environmental degradation often affects the poorest communities most severely because they depend directly on natural resources for their livelihood. Oil spills, mining activities, desertification, and deforestation have destroyed farmlands, polluted water sources, and displaced local populations across several African regions. Consequently, ecological injustice is also social injustice because environmental harm frequently reinforces existing inequalities and human suffering.[15]

Biodiversity

Biological diversity (biodiversity) is "the variability among living organisms from all sources, including, inter alia, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part; this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems."[16] This definition of biodiversity refers to the variety of living organisms within ecosystems, including plants, animals,

[12]Vandana Shiva (1989). *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Zed Books, London. P. 42-44.
[13]Cynthia Louise Grier (2026). "What Is Ecological Justice?" retrieved from https://ecologiclife.com/what-is-ecological-justice-definition.html. Sourced 22/05/2026
[14]Ibid.
[15]United Nations Environment Programme (2013). *Africa Environment Outlook 3: Our Environment, Our Health,* Nairobi.
[16]World Health Organisation (2015). *Connecting Global Priorities: Biodiversity and Human Health*. WHO and Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, Geneva. P.1

microorganisms, and their ecological interactions. Healthy biodiversity sustains life by maintaining ecological balance, supporting food production, preserving medicinal resources, regulating climate systems, and protecting water and soil quality.

Ethics of Care and Inclusion

The ethics of care emerged as a moral principle that emphasises relationships, compassion, attentiveness, empathy, and responsibility toward vulnerable persons. Unlike ethical theories that focus primarily on abstract rules or individual autonomy, care ethics emphasises human interdependence and the moral importance of responding to others' needs.[18] The ethics of care recognises that human beings flourish within relationships of mutual support and shared responsibility. "The ethics of care starts from the premise that, as humans, we are inherently relational, responsive beings, and that the human condition is one of connectedness or interdependence."[19] Within African societies, the ethics of care resonates strongly with communitarian traditions that prioritise solidarity, hospitality, and collective well-being. African moral thought often stresses that a person becomes fully human through relationships with others.[20] Care is therefore not merely an emotional attitude but a social and moral obligation necessary for communal harmony and survival. Applying an ethics of care to ecological justice means recognising that the environment is not separate from human life but part of the relational network that sustains existence. Nature should not be treated only as a commodity for exploitation but as a shared home requiring stewardship and protection. An ethics of care encourages attentiveness to ecological vulnerability and challenges systems that sacrifice communities and ecosystems for profit or unchecked industrial expansion. Inclusion complements care ethics by insisting that marginalised voices must participate in decisions affecting their lives and environments.

Gender, Biodiversity, and Ecological Crisis in Africa

Over 70 per cent of Africa's population is rural and depends directly on land for livelihoods and the natural environment for its well-being. Thus, how environments, goods and services are used will have consequences for alleviating poverty, improving human well-being and ensuring sustained economic development.[21] Africa continues to experience serious ecological challenges that threaten both biodiversity and human well-being. Climate change, deforestation, desertification, pollution, rapid urbanisation, and the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources have contributed to the destruction of ecosystems across the continent. These environmental problems

[17]World Health Organisation (2015). *Connecting Global Priorities: Biodiversity and Human Health*. WHO and Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, Geneva. P.

[18]Carol Gilligan (1982*). In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development.* Library of Congress Cataloguing In Publication Data, USA. P. 63

[19] Carol Gilligan (2011). "Ethics of Care". Webteam. Retrieved from https://ethicsofcare.org/carol-gilligan/. Sourced 23/05/2026.

[20] Ifeanyi Menkiti (2020) Menkiti on Community and Becoming a Person. Edited by Edwin Etieyibo and Polycarp Ikuenobe. Lanham Boulder, New York, London. P.137

[21]United Nations Environment Programme (2006). *Africa Environment Outlook 2: Our Environment, Our Health*. Lanchester Library, Nairobi.p.2

affect forests, rivers, wildlife, agricultural lands, and local communities that depend directly on nature for survival. However, the ecological crisis in Africa is not experienced equally by all people. Gender significantly shapes how environmental degradation is experienced because women and men interact differently with natural resources based on social responsibilities and economic roles.[22]

The involvement of African women in farming, fishing, biodiversity conservation, and environmental management is widely recognised. However, women's involvement and representation in decision-making processes which relate to their livelihoods, families and environmental well-being are often relegated.[23] Rural communities rely heavily on forests, water bodies, medicinal plants, fertile soil, and diverse agricultural systems for food security, healthcare, and economic livelihood. In Nigeria, for example, biodiversity supports subsistence farming, fishing, traditional medicine, and local industries. Yet increasing environmental degradation continues to threaten these ecological systems. Oil pollution in the Niger Delta, desertification in northern Nigeria, deforestation in rainforest regions, and flooding in coastal communities illustrate the growing ecological instability confronting the country.[24] These crises weaken ecosystems while simultaneously increasing poverty, food insecurity, displacement, and public health vulnerability. Women in Africa, just like every other part of the world, remain an intimate part of nature, both in imagination and in practise. At one level, nature is symbolised as the embodiment of the feminine principle, and at another, she is nurtured by the feminine to produce life and provide sustenance.[25] "With the violation of nature is linked the violation and marginalisation of women, especially in the Third World. Women produce and reproduce life not merely biologically, but also through their social role in providing sustenance."[26]

At the same time, they are among the most affected by ecological degradation because of their close relationship with the environment in many African societies. In rural communities, women are primarily responsible for food production, water collection, fuel gathering, and family care. Their daily survival activities depend directly on access to healthy ecosystems and biodiversity. Consequently, when forests disappear, rivers become polluted, or agricultural productivity declines, women often bear the heaviest social and economic burdens.[27] For instance, deforestation forces many women to travel longer distances searching for firewood, while water scarcity increases the time

[22]Socio-Health (2026). "Ecology, Environment and Urban Development: Exploring the Gender-Environment Nexus: Interconnected Challenges". Retrieved from https://socio.health/ecology-environment-urban-development/gender-environment-nexus-challenges/. Sourced

[23] Sam, Kabari & Zibima, Tubodenyefa. (2023). Inclusive Environmental Decision-making in a Developing Nation: Insights from the Ogoni Remediation Project, Niger Delta, Nigeria. Environmental Management. 73. 1-15. 10.1007/s00267-023-01885-y.

[24]Ibid.

[25]Vandana Shiva *(1998). Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Zed Books, London. P. 37

[26]Vandana Shiva *(1998). Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Zed Books, London. P. 41

[27]Vandana Shiva *(1998). Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Zed Books, London. Pp. 41-42

and labour required to secure safe water for household use. Though they are not merely victims of ecological crisis, they are also important custodians of biodiversity and indigenous ecological knowledge.[28]

> Rural women are pivotal to development in African countries as they play diverse roles in development projects and initiatives. They contribute to wage activities, engage in the marketing and distribution of foodstuffs, and ensure the survival of both the family and social unit. Specifically, their domestic activities make vital contributions to the maintenance of local economies. For example, Yoruba women possess an enormous amount of knowledge about food production and processing, medicine, childrearing, and other survival skills. It is therefore important that Indigenous women, as custodians of knowledge about both biodiversity and land use and management, are recognised and encouraged to use their knowledge to enhance sustainable development.[29]

Their farming methods often rely on mixed cropping, organic fertilisation, and environmentally sensitive practices that protect biodiversity more effectively than exploitative industrial systems. Despite their contributions to environmental sustainability, women remain largely excluded from ecological governance and environmental decision-making across many African societies. Patriarchal structures continue to limit women's access to land ownership, political participation, and environmental policy formation.

Rethinking Biodiversity through an Ethics of Care and Inclusion

The growing loss of biodiversity across Africa has raised urgent questions about humanity's relationship with nature and the moral responsibilities required for ecological sustainability. Increasing rates of deforestation, climate change, pollution, urban expansion, oil exploration, overgrazing, soil erosion, and desertification threaten the biodiversity of medicinal and food-security value. Overharvesting and climate change also contribute to biodiversity degradation, leading to imbalances in predator-prey relationships that may create conditions for disease outbreaks. Unsustainable agricultural practices also continue to destroy ecosystems that sustain both human and non-human life.[30] Yet many responses to biodiversity loss remain largely economic, scientific, or technological, often neglecting the ethical and social dimensions of ecological destruction. Biodiversity cannot be separated from human well-being, especially in Africa. The reason is that millions of people depend directly on forests,

[28]Yetunde Adebunmi Aluko (2018). "Women's Use of Indigenous Knowledge for Environmental Security and Sustainable Development in Southwest Nigeria," *The International Indigenous Policy Journal* 9, no. 3. P.2

[29]Yetunde Adebunmi Aluko (2018). "Women's Use of Indigenous Knowledge for Environmental Security and Sustainable Development in Southwest Nigeria," *The International Indigenous Policy Journal* 9, no. 3. P.2

[30]UNEP (2013). "Africa Environment Outlook 3: Summary for Policy Makers". p. 10

rivers, fertile land, and local ecosystems for food, medicine, livelihoods, etc. Consequently, the ecological crisis demands not only environmental policies but also an ethical rethinking of how human beings relate to nature, community, and one another.

"Biodiversity conservation ethics addresses normative questions about what should be conserved, how, and why, guiding actions and decisions over values and their potential conflict."[31] Ethics as a philosophical discipline involves systematising, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behaviour, and, broadly, considers questions about how we should (or should not) act and what obligations we have to other beings. [32]

> By ethical reasoning, we refer more broadly also to non-academic approaches to ethical questions that are internal to humanity. Ethical reasoning influences economic, political, and other societal decisions that ultimately cause biodiversity loss by triggering its main drivers: land-use change, climate change, and over-exploitation. Ethical reasoning also influences people's perceptions of problems, of relevant factors in resolving them, and the disposition to promote and comply with policies and regulations to tackle them. Thus, engaging in ethical reasoning is crucial as it shapes human actions and is influential to both biodiversity decline and its conservation.[33]

The ethics of care emphasises empathy, relationships, and responsibility, unlike traditional ethical theories that emphasise fairness and justice.[34] It highlights the need to nurture and care for individuals in various contexts. From this perspective, biodiversity protection becomes more than a technical environmental duty; it becomes a moral obligation rooted in the preservation of life and communal well-being. The relevance of care ethics to biodiversity conservation becomes clearer within the African context, where communal life and relational identity remain important cultural values. African communitarian philosophy generally understands the individual as existing within networks of relationships that include family, community, ancestors, and nature

> According to John, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create or produce the individual, for the individual depends on the corporate group. This relational understanding encourages respect for interconnected life and supports ecological responsibility.[35]

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[31]Cortes-Capano, Gonzalo et-al (2022). "Ethics in biodiversity conservation: The meaning and importance of pluralism. Biological Conservation". Retrieved from https://www.elsevier.com/locate/biocon 275. 109759. 10.1016/j.biocon.2022.109759.

[32]Ibid.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Neeshu Rathore (2025). The Heart of Relationships: Exploring Ethics of Care. Retrieved from https:// glossary. psywellpath.com/ethics-of-care#what-is-ethics-of-care/

[35] John Mbiti (1969). *African Religions and Philosophy.* Heinemann Educational Publishers, Oxford. P. 106

Nature is not merely viewed as property for private exploitation but as part of the communal heritage necessary for collective survival. In many African societies, women have historically embodied this ethic of care through their relationship with biodiversity and environmental sustainability. Women are often responsible for farming, food preservation, seed conservation, water management, and family health. Through these activities, they maintain practical relationships with ecosystems and preserve indigenous ecological knowledge passed down through generations. Their interaction with biodiversity is often shaped by care-centred responsibilities aimed at sustaining households and communities rather than maximising profit. This explains why women in many rural communities often adopt environmentally sensitive practices, such as mixed cropping, traditional soil conservation, and the preservation of medicinal plants.

However, as mentioned above, despite their ecological contributions, women and local communities are frequently excluded from biodiversity governance and environmental decision-making. Environmental policies in many African states continue to operate through centralised political and economic systems that prioritise industrial development and resource extraction over ecological sustainability and local participation.[36] Such exclusion weakens conservation efforts because those most closely connected to ecosystems are denied meaningful involvement in decisions affecting their environment. Inclusion, therefore, becomes essential to any serious attempt at biodiversity protection.

An ethics of inclusion insists that ecological justice must involve participation, recognition, and shared responsibility. Biodiversity conservation cannot succeed when vulnerable populations remain marginalised from environmental governance. Rural women, indigenous communities, farmers, and local environmental actors possess valuable ecological knowledge developed through long interaction with local ecosystems. Excluding them from ecological policies creates solutions detached from the realities of community life. Inclusion, therefore, strengthens biodiversity conservation by integrating indigenous knowledge, grassroots participation, and communal accountability into environmental management.

Ecofeminist thought further deepens this discussion by arguing that the domination of nature is closely connected to systems that marginalise women and vulnerable groups. Vandana Shiva contends that exploitative economic systems frequently reduce both women and nature to objects of control and consumption. [37]

In many African societies, environmental degradation intensifies the burdens carried by

[36]Sam, Kabari & Zibima, Tubodenyefa. (2023). Inclusive Environmental Decision-making in a Developing Nation: Insights from the Ogoni Remediation Project, Niger Delta, Nigeria. Environmental Management. 73. 1-15. 10.1007/s00267-023-01885-y.

[37]Vandana Shiva *(1998). Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Zed Books, London. Pp. 92-93

women through food shortages, water scarcity, displacement, and declining agricultural productivity. At the same time, women continue to emerge as important agents of ecological resilience and biodiversity preservation. Rethinking biodiversity through care and inclusion, therefore, requires moving beyond purely anthropocentric and profit-driven models of development. Economic growth that destroys ecosystems, displaces communities, and deepens social inequality cannot be regarded as genuine development. Sustainable biodiversity conservation must instead be rooted in ecological stewardship, moral responsibility, and communal well-being. This involves recognising that human survival depends upon healthy ecosystems and that environmental protection is inseparable from social justice.

Therefore, rethinking biodiversity through an ethics of care and inclusion offers a more humane and sustainable approach to ecological justice in Africa. It shifts environmental discourse away from domination, exclusion, and excessive exploitation toward relational responsibility, solidarity, and ecological stewardship.

Toward an Inclusive Ecological Future in Africa

The ecological future of Africa depends greatly on the ability of its people, governments, institutions, and communities to rethink the relationship between humanity and the natural environment. Across the continent, environmental degradation continues to manifest through climate change, desertification, pollution, flooding, deforestation, and the loss of biodiversity. These ecological crises affect human life directly, especially among poor and vulnerable populations whose survival depends largely on the land and natural resources. Scholars have increasingly argued that ecological destruction in Africa cannot be separated from questions of social justice, inequality, gender exclusion, and poor governance.[38] Thus, the search for an inclusive ecological future requires more than environmental reforms; it demands a transformation in the ethical, social, and political structures that shape African societies.

An inclusive ecological future begins with recognising the interconnectedness between human beings and nature. Many traditional African worldviews understood the earth not merely as property for exploitation but as a sacred reality entrusted to the community for present and future generations. John S. Mbiti observes that in African thought, the individual exists within a network that includes the community, ancestors, and the natural world.[39] This relational worldview can provide an important ethical foundation for ecological responsibility in contemporary Africa. Instead of viewing nature solely as something beneficial for industrial expansion, African societies can recover indigenous ecological values that emphasise harmony, communal responsibility, and respect for life.

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[38]Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier (1997). *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South.* Earthscan, London. Pp. 13-15.

[39] John Mbiti (1969). *African Religions and Philosophy.* Heinemann Educational Publishers, Oxford. Pp. 106-107

Furthermore, it has been clearly established that women remain central to ecological sustainability in Africa. This is because of their close relationship with food production, water management, caregiving, and agriculture. In light of their contributions to the environment, environmental justice cannot be achieved without their inclusion and empowerment. Maathai's environmental activism in Kenya demonstrated how ecological restoration and human dignity are deeply interconnected. Therefore, an inclusive ecological future in Africa must ensure that women are not treated merely as victims of ecological crises but as active participants in environmental transformation.

Young people also play a significant role in shaping Africa's ecological future. The growing ecological crisis demands a generation that is environmentally conscious, ethically responsible, and socially engaged. Education is essential in this regard. Ecological education should encourage young people to recognise that caring for the environment is not only a scientific concern but also a moral obligation to humanity and future generations. Pope Francis emphasises in Laudato Si' that ecological challenges require a new lifestyle marked by responsibility, solidarity, and care for our common home. "He emphasised that we lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone. This basic awareness would enable the development of new convictions, attitudes and forms of life"[40]. This ethical consciousness is especially important in Africa, where rapid urbanisation, unemployment, and environmental exploitation continue to threaten sustainable development.

The role of political leadership and governance cannot be ignored in discussions about Africa's ecological future. Corruption, irresponsible mining practices, deforestation, and poor environmental policies have contributed significantly to ecological destruction across the continent. Sustainable ecological development requires leaders who prioritise the common good over personal or economic interests. Governments must strengthen environmental laws, support renewable energy initiatives, invest in sustainable agriculture, and protect local communities from exploitation by multinational corporations. Africa's future depends on reimagining forms of development that value human life and ecological sustainability rather than systems rooted in exploitation and exclusion.

Religious institutions also have an important contribution to make in promoting ecological awareness and ethical responsibility. Since religion continues to shape moral consciousness in many African societies, churches, mosques, and traditional religious communities can help cultivate values of moderation, stewardship, and communal care. Theological reflections on creation increasingly emphasise that human beings are

[40]Pope Francis *(2015). Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City. No. 202

caretakers rather than masters of the earth. Ecological spirituality, therefore, challenges individuals and communities to adopt lifestyles that respect both human dignity and the integrity of creation. Faith communities can further contribute through environmental education, tree-planting initiatives, advocacy, and support for vulnerable populations affected by ecological crises.

Furthermore, ecological sustainability in Africa must be built upon dialogue and inclusion. Local communities, indigenous groups, women, scholars, policymakers, and environmental activists should all participate in shaping ecological policies and development projects. Too often, development initiatives in Africa are designed without listening to the experiences of those most affected by environmental degradation. Inclusive participation ensures that ecological policies are not imposed from above but emerge from the lived realities of communities themselves. Such an approach promotes justice, accountability, and sustainability.

Ultimately, the future of ecology in Africa depends on developing a vision of progress that balances economic growth with human wellbeing and environmental protection. Africa possesses rich cultural traditions, communal values, and indigenous ecological knowledge that can contribute meaningfully to global environmental discussions. An inclusive ecological future, therefore, calls for a renewed commitment to care, justice, solidarity, and responsibility. By embracing these values, Africa can move toward a future where development does not destroy nature, where vulnerable voices are included, and where humanity lives in harmony with the earth.

Conclusion

The ecological crisis in Africa is not only an environmental problem but also a moral, social, and human challenge that demands urgent attention. This article has shown that ecological degradation disproportionately affects vulnerable groups, especially women and marginalised communities, whose lives are closely connected to the natural environment. By examining biodiversity loss, gender exclusion, and ecological injustice within the African context, the paper argues that sustainable ecological development cannot be achieved without inclusion, care, and social responsibility.

Drawing from African communal values, ecofeminist insights, and ethical reflections on care and responsibility, this paper emphasises the need to rethink humanity's relationship with nature. An inclusive ecological future requires the participation of women, local communities, religious institutions, scholars, and political leaders in shaping environmentally responsible policies and practices. Ecological justice must therefore go beyond environmental protection to include human dignity, equity, and the well-being of future generations. Ultimately, this work calls for a renewed ecological consciousness in Africa, one that promotes harmony between humanity and nature, respects biodiversity, and embraces an ethics of care and inclusion as essential pathways toward sustainable development and ecological justice.

Although care and communal solidarity have traditionally been regarded as defining features of many African societies, contemporary ecological and social conflicts reveal a growing disconnect between these ethical ideals and lived realities. Rising xenophobic violence, resource-based conflicts, environmental degradation, and political exclusion suggest that the practice of care has become increasingly selective and contingent upon ethnic, political, and economic interests. Consequently, the challenge before contemporary Africa is not to abandon the ethics of care but to reclaim and expand it as an inclusive moral principle capable of responding to present ecological and social crises.

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