

# **Learning From Women's Grassroots' Activism: Gender Reflections On Environmental Policy, Science and Participatory Processes<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Males predominate as politicians and governmental officers, experts, stakeholders and citizens in the majority of environment-related participatory processes. However, not much attention has been given to gender in environmental governance. This paper argues that gender is significant for participatory processes because differences between female and male environment-related interests in information and concerns exist.

The argument is explored by highlighting the results of two research projects. First, a survey conducted in Spain (2004) by the FECYT will show gender tendencies in the perceptions of science and technology. Second, a gender study of three citizens' committees that were involved in a number of environmental conflicts in the north-east of Catalonia (Spain) will illustrate the discussion regarding women's specific environmental concerns.

Throughout the article, different interpretations of the relevance of gender in environmental concerns are explored, mainly in relation to Ecofeminist theories. The paper concludes by proposing further reflections about the relevance and challenges of recognising gender differences in participatory processes embedded in environmental governance.

## **Why does gender matter? From claiming representation to recognising difference**

Although UN Agenda 21 published in 1992 as a result of the Rio Earth Summit strongly highlighted the relevance of seeking gender equity in order to progress towards a sustainable society (United Nations, 1992), the implementation of Local Agenda 21 (LA21) in Europe has been repeatedly gender-blind.

By 2002, 5,292 LA21 projects had been implemented in 36 countries of the European continent, and had significantly improved the involvement of communities in local environment-related planning and policy making, although women's groups were still among those the most excluded (ICLEI, 2002). A survey of 127 European local authorities revealed that 105 didn't address any women-related subject. "Women's

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed in this contribution are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the European Commission.

issues" was the third highest topic ignored from a list of 26 areas of activity (ICLEI, 2001).

Gender-blindness in the design of participatory processes has direct consequences on female representation. The usual predominance of male representatives in public environments leads to male-laden unbalances in participatory activities. For example, the omission of gender from the design of LA21 in Catalonia (an autonomous community in the north-east of Spain) entailed that informative sessions were unbalanced with 31 male and 6 female speakers. Thematic participatory sessions with stakeholders and citizens included 104 men and 56 women. Promisingly, gender balance was reached in regional participatory activities (118 men and 100 women were invited), but lower female representation occurred in strategic discussion groups such as "territory and mobility" (20 men and 3 women), which are traditionally male-dominated political and scientific areas (Littig, 2001).

The Charter of the United Nations published in 1945 was the first international governmental document that stated equality between men and women as a fundamental human right (United Nations 1945). Since 1996, the crosscutting gender mainstreaming strategy of the European Commission seeks to «incorporate equal opportunities for women and men into all Community policies and activities» (COM (96) 67 Final). In accordance with this institutional goal, to promote gender equity in the flourishing participatory practices, emerging from the application of governance principles (Commission of the European Communities, 2001), steps up our efforts to advance (Western) human rights.

In this paper I will argue that the 'human rights' issue is only one of the many legitimate reasons for promoting gender in environmental governance practices. I will propose the argument that 'recognising differences' is necessary to support a gender approach in environment-related participatory-processes. The argument will be illustrated by two studies that (1) show men and women have different perceptions of science and technology and (2) illustrate gender may be relevant to the interpretation of different environmental concerns.

The first study consists of a survey on the social perception of science and technology in Spain which was conducted by the Spanish foundation for science and technology (FECYT), in 2004. The second study, developed by the author between 2003 and 2004, consists of a qualitative research of three citizens' committees which emerged in north-east of Catalonia due to environmental conflicts.

Gender differences are interpreted by highlighting Ecofeminist theories throughout the article. In the conclusion I will argue that the recognition of gender differences may bring an innovative outlook to the development of the participatory process, by bringing plurality to the design, empowering participants and assessing the quality of scientific knowledge involved.

### **The meanings of 'difference' in the Ecofeminist paradigm**

Are human rights the only argument for seeking gender equity in participatory processes? Once equal numbers of male and female politicians, experts and citizens are involved in a participatory activity, should we expect any change in the process or

the results? Is gender relevant for interpreting our different values and interests in the environment? Answers to these questions relate directly to the use of sex or gender-based arguments to explain differences between men and women, which is the seed of many lively debates in Ecofeminism.

Someone said that there are as many Ecofeminist theories as there are Ecofeminist authors (Lahar, 1991; Birkeland, 1993). Despite such a variety of ideological basis, cultural roots and specific contexts of practice, we could still differentiate two extreme opposite tendencies in the Ecofeminist movement: the essentialist or biology-based and the socio-political one.

Generally, Ecofeminist authors agree that the patriarchal oppression of women and nature are connected (Merchant, 1980; King, 1990), and that women have specific concerns for the degradation of the environment, but they differ in the interpretation of these statements. At one edge of the spectrum, essentialist interpretations<sup>2</sup> state that genuine female experiences like pregnancy, feeding and nurturing a baby lead women to a biological connection with nature, understood as the maximum expression of 'life' (Spretnak, 1982, 1990; Salleh, 1984; Eisler, 1990; Starhawk, 1990; Mies & Shiva, 1997; Oreinstein, 2003).

Western culture conceived modern society on the basis of separating (the male part of) humanity from nature. Human specificity was legitimated on (modern male) reason (Puleo, 1994). Women were implicitly excluded from the modern project through highlighting the link of women's physiology, social roles and psyche with nature (Ortner, 1974), and by linking femininity with emotion, empathy, and the personal and the particular, which are conceived to be opposite to the (masculine) rational, universal, abstract and moral modern thought (Plumwood, 1991).

Over time and with the progressive access of women to most public arenas, the reason-man symbiosis is increasingly less established solely on the basis of sexual identity. By contrast, many men and women assume the (androcentric) rational model in public environments. The western masculine-identified hegemony has been called (ethno-) androcentrism (Moreno, 1987, 1993; Birkeland, 1993; Brú-Bistuer, 1997). The link of femininity with nature is still applied to women in the private sphere through biology-based arguments. Following that dualistic logic, ethno-androcentrism also treats non-hegemonic masculinities, such as homosexual men or men of ethnic minorities, under the feminine side of humanity, i.e. homosexual men are expected to be strongly emotional whilst indigenous people are conceived as closer to nature.

Essentialist Ecofeminists accept the patriarchal construction of men as the "builders" of culture and women as connected to nature, as described above. However, in the face of the environmental crisis, the two sides of this power dualism are inverted; men are accused of bringing society into an ecological collapse, and women are acknowledged as natural peacekeepers and saviours of the Earth (Griffin, 1990; Mies & Shiva, 1997). Some authors propose a female-based spirituality to fight materialism dominant in capitalist society (Spretnak, 1982; Starhawk, 1990). Non-western indigenous cultures are identified as the source for a more harmonious relation with nature.

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<sup>2</sup> In other words: 'radical cultural feminism' (King, 1982) or 'radical feminism' (Merchant, 1982).

At the opposite edge of the spectrum, socio-political Ecofeminist tendencies<sup>3</sup> point to (socio-culturally-based) gender attitudes, behaviours and roles and to economic and social vulnerability of women to explain female concerns with the environment.

The traditional female role of caring is used to explain women's fears on health and security risks derived from environmental and technology-related controversies. Whether the carer role is experienced individually, the conception of caring as a female task is conceived as a social and cultural product.

Feminists have observed the use of the "maternal archetype" by the Ecofeminist and Ecological movements with critical eyes because of the reinforcement of the patriarchal conception of women as constrained by their sexed bodies (Roach 1991, Stearney 1994). Although traditional female qualities linked to the caring role, such as empathy, respect, concern, responsibility, have been seen as the source of a non-androcentric attitude towards nature and the environment, which has inspired the development of a feminist environmental ethic (Curtin, 1991; Plumwood, 1991; Warren, 1998).

The present paper is influenced by theoretical approaches in socio-political tendencies of Ecofeminism. Two assumptions are worthy of mention in relation to the specific approach to gender differences developed in the text.

Firstly, I discuss the differences between men and women as gender-based (i.e. socio-culturally constructed). In contrast, I feel extremely suspicious about essentialist interpretations. If I accept that biology may play a relevant role in determining male and female specificity, this fact does not automatically validate biology-based interpretations. The analysis of our biological heritage is inevitably biased by cultural views. The critical review of deterministic scientific interpretations of society, e.g. the search for physical differences between the male and female human brain since the 19th century in the field of neurosciences (Vidal, 2006), have shown that they are biased and instrumental for ideologies that alienate and constrain the less powerful members of society.

Secondly, I discuss that power relations are the core reason for explaining why gender differences are relevant. Gender differences (such as power relations) are not avoidable nor negative *per se*. However, by 'differentiating' subjects by their sex or gender we may follow very different ideological projects. In the logic of ethno-androcentrism, gender (and ethnic) difference is constructed to legitimise the dominant identity of the white male (Lorde, 1984). Ethno-androcentrism uses differences to legitimise inequities, exclusion, domination and oppression of some members of society. Contrastingly, in the frame of gender studies, recognition of difference is a strategy to give women (and other non-hegemonic social and cultural groups) power to bring their own views to society and follows the aim of strengthening the pluralism and inclusiveness of democracy (Young 1990, Fraser 1996).

## **Gender differences in the social perception of science and technology in Spain**

General population opinion polls (mainly in US-based) have shown that women tend to be more concerned with environmental risks and perceive to a lesser extent than men, the benefits of our highly industrial and developed society (Gutteling & Wiegman 1993;

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<sup>3</sup> In other words: 'socialist feminism' (Merchant 1982), 'feminist political ecology' (Rocheleau et al. 1996)

Flynn et al. 1994; Davison & Freudenburg, 1996; Boetzkes, 1998; Finucane et al., 2000; Dietz et al., 2002; Satterfield et al., 2004).

Similarly, a study on the social perception of science and technology in Spain, conducted in 2004 by the FECYT, concluded that in relation to the perception of the benefits that science and technology may bring to social progress and welfare, «although all enquired showed more a positive than negative view, women were less optimistic (or at least more sceptic)»<sup>4</sup> than men (Pérez-Sedeño, 2005: 201)<sup>5</sup>. In this survey, gender differences were extremely relevant when referring to citizens interests in information. Sport (50%) and culture (18.4%) were the first and second interests in information of Spanish males. Female interests were more dispersed and pointed to medicine and health (29.5%), food and consumption (20.2%) and culture (18.8%). Interestingly, the two items ranked as the most relevant by a significant number of women were connected to environmental and scientific and technological controversies. However, when asking about specific interests in environmental and ecology-related information, men (11.3%) showed slightly higher results than women (10.4%). The results of the Spanish survey also suggested a significant gap between the number of women consulting popular scientific magazines (5.8%) and books on science and technology (2.7%) or ecology and the environment (3.1%) and men (8.5%, 6% and 3.3.% respectively).

Finally, more women than men showed awareness of some scientific information directly related to health and security in everyday life; when using medicines women (86.6%) more often than men (78%) read patient information leaflets, more women (83.5%) than men (75.9%) try to be informed when a health alarm occurs, and more women (73.9%) than men (60.6%) usually read food labels.

Although the results of the survey point to women, more so than men, as having specific concerns for health and security-related issues (i.e. medicine and health, food and consumption) and using scientific information in their everyday life, the low interest of women in popular scientific resources is viewed upon critically.

Dominant disciplinary approaches in the physical sciences have tended towards specialisation and hermetic knowledge, and scientific and humanistic traditions have excluded each other (Meadows 1998, Mills 1959). The social, political and ethical dimensions of environmental problems are increasingly receiving more attention, but in practice environmental problems are mainly conceived by a 'hard' scientific and technological knowledge approach and communication rhetoric that disconnects them from social contexts (Macnaghten & Urry, 1998; In't Veld, 2000).

The little interest of women in "environment and ecology" related information could be interpreted as a consequence of the detachment of mainstream techno-scientific approaches to the environment from the local and everyday life concerns of most people (Brú-Bistuer, 1996). The female gap of interest in popular scientific books and magazines may point to the same hypothesis. If this hypothesis is correct, women may have little scientific knowledge sources that help them to inform themselves and empower their own perspectives on the environment and/or science and technology-related issues.

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<sup>4</sup> Author's translation of Pérez-Sedeño (2005: 201).

<sup>5</sup> 44.4% of women and 49.5% of men think that benefits from science and technology are higher than the damages; 34,2% of women and 32,4% of men believe that the benefits and damages are balanced, and 12,2% of women and 12% of men think that the damages are greater than the benefits (Pérez-Sedeño, 2005).

## Gender observations in local citizens' committees for environmental conflicts: case studies in North Catalonia (Spain)

Gender differences in environmental concerns have been a specific subject of study for sociologists. Higher environmental awareness in females is still in discussion. However, studies strongly suggest that women show a greater concern than men for environmental problems that have negative effects on health and security, and this is particularly true for cases of local conflicts (Blocker & Eckberg, 1989, 1997; Davison & Freudenburg 1996; Brown & Ferguson, 1997; Mohai, 1997; Boetzkes, 1998; Caiazza & Barret, 2003).

Although gender balance is not the norm, women's participation in civil movements is greater than in political or ecologist organisations (Mohai, 1997; Boetzkes, 1998; Walsh, 2001; Caiazza & Barret, 2003). In particular, women have mobilised in high numbers for local conflicts that are related to environment-related health problems. For instance, the case of women campaigning against toxic waste disposal is already well documented (Brown & Ferguson, 1997).

Specific conflicts related to the local environment provoked the emergence of three citizens' committees in the North of Catalonia, Spain (see map 1). A gender-focused research of the three organisations collected information about the local and general environmental concerns of the men and women<sup>6</sup>. Some of the results obtained showed the specificity of females views in the cases under study.



Map 1. Geographical location of the case studies

<sup>6</sup> See AGÜERA-CABO, M. 2006. Gender, Values and Power in Local Environmental Conflicts. The Case of Grassroots Organisations in North Catalonia. *Environmental Values* [in press].

The field research was carried-out from July 2003 until December 2004. Representatives from the three popular organisations were interviewed (July 2003). The results of the interviews, together with information of the conflicts (e.g., journals, organisations' webpage), were used to design enquiries that aimed at collecting information about the relevance of gender in, the reasons for campaigning, general environmental concerns, and power relations inside the organisations (November 2003-March 2004). When distributing the questionnaires, the aim was not to specifically obtain a representative or casual sample, as the opinions of the most active members of the organisations were wanted. Consequently, this strategy limited the number of questionnaires collected. Nevertheless, the approach of the study was qualitative and there was no intention of providing robust statistical data. In total, 108 completed questionnaires were collected (33 for case 1, 43 for case 2 and 32 for case 3).

Personal interviews were planned after the questionnaire results had been analysed (December 2004). The main objective was to capture the testimony of female activists in what I have called experience-based organisations. Some male members with key roles in the conflict of case 1 were also addressed. In total, eight members from case 1 (5 women and 3 men) and 11 female members from case 2 were interviewed.

With the aim of interpreting the significance of gender differences in the opinion of the members not only inside but also between the organisations, citizens committees were classified according to two types of organisations, ideology-based and experience-based.

With ideology-based organisations I refer to local civil movements where ideological and political perspectives on the environment and the area's development lay at the basis for mobilisation and campaigning as exemplified by case 3, *Salvem les Valls*. In 1994, the people mobilised against the construction of a main road and a tunnel which was promoted by the regional government of Catalonia. Since its beginning, this organisation saw the project it opposed as an unsustainable model of development. The construction of the main road and tunnel was perceived by the members of the organisation as an urban aggression to rural and natural areas. Political expectations on local sustainable development were the main reason for campaigning.



Picture 1. Image of a mobilisation of *Salvem les Valls*, Case 3.

In addition, quality of life was a main argument of mobilisation for most members. However, the concept of quality of life for *Salvem les Valls* has a more ideological value to it. Its idea of quality of life underlines the social benefits of living in a natural environment, and it questions the potential benefits emerging from increased economic resources.

Contrarily, I talk about experience-based movements when personal and collective negative experiences regarding local environmental issues prevailed for mobilising citizens.

This is the case of the citizens' movement called *Coordinadora Antilínia de les Gavarres*, or Civil Platform Against the High Tension Power Line of Gavarres, case 1. During 1997 to 2002, the organisation fought against the construction of a high tension power line that would supply more energy to the tourist area of Costa Brava; the power line was planned to go through a number of villages and rural areas of the pre-littoral. Unclear scientific evidence (i.e. high uncertainty) about the effects of the high tension power line on people's health prevailed among the people that organised themselves around the citizen's committee. The opinion that infrastructures developed for tourist-related economic activities had caused local degradation and overloaded the capacity of the pre-littoral area (often without direct benefits to local population) was also a reason for mobilising many members.



Picture 2. Image of a mobilisation of Coordinadora Antlinia de les Gavarres, Case 1.

*Salvem l'Empordà*, case 2, was founded in 2002 by a local ecologist organisation with the main objective to form a strong alternative to the business developers and to meet the interests of local inhabitants of the Empordà region. They are involved in several conflicts related to the high tourist and urban speculation and agricultural exploitation. Current over use of the territory has already impacted strongly on the life of its inhabitants. Problems include the short supply of drinking water and the contamination of water coming from golf resorts and industrial pork farms. Therefore, although the organisation also points to ideological arguments, they deal with problems that affect local inhabitants in their daily life. Representatives of the organisation pointed to experience-based arguments to explain the organisation's acceptance among the people:

«We have commented this many times... [the organisation] has been very well accepted [by the community] because of the problem with nitrates. They [the local inhabitants] have had serious problems with drinking water. It is very serious, don't you think? You open the tap and you know you can't drink that water. Or you want to boil pasta and you have to use water from bottles. This influences your opinions. You come into a point in which you think this is enough!» (*Salvem l'Empordà* Representatives, 2003).



Picture 3. Image of a mobilisation of Salvem l'Empordà, Case 2.

Interestingly, the results from the enquiries showed females tended to have specific concerns with the environment in the case of the two experience-based organisations. Women in the experience-based organisations (cases 1 and 2) showed a strong concern for health and quality of life issues. During the interviews, women also pointed to the environmental heritage left to future generations and to the degradation of the landscape. In all, female activists in the organisations classified as experience-based displayed a specific female standpoint when expressing their environmental concerns. In contrast, enquiries results from *Salvem les Valls*, case 3, didn't show the same female tendencies

Another difference between the two types of organisations was gender balance. While the experience-based organisations had a similar number of male and female activists, it was not the case in the ideology-based one; 13 women and 19 men from *Salvem les Valls* answered the questionnaires. During the interview the leader of the organisation explicitly mentioned the original and actual male predominance:

«I would state there are more men than women (...) I certainly think initially men were more numerous. During last years -mainly three last years-, women have strongly arrived to the organisation (...)» (*Salvem les Valls* representative, 2003).

Finally, women's sociological profile showed significant differences when comparing experience-based organisations with the ideology-based organisation. The ages of the women in experience-based organisations were mainly late thirties and forties. By contrast, ideology-based organisations were mainly composed of women in their twenties, and most of them were also university-educated.

### **The significance of gender in women's concerns in the experience-based organisations**

Throughout diverse questions in the enquiries, health emerged as a relevant concern of women in the experience-based organisations. When men in the same organisations

also indicated health as one of their environment-related concerns, they always did so with less intensity than women.

In case 1, in which potential health risks of the high tension power line triggered the development of the organisation<sup>7</sup>, women (12 out of 15) clearly ranked health reasons as their first argument for female activism. In contrast, the men ranked the health argument lower than the women (12 out of 18), and nearly equal to the political argument that the power line was contrary to the sustainable model of development that Catalonia should follow (10 out of 18).

Most women (14 out of 15) from case 1 also ranked health impacts of environmental problems, from a list of 13 items, as their main concern for the global environment. Again fewer men indicated this same concern (13 out of 20 men).

The same question had similar but more extreme results in case 2, in which health was not a main reason for campaigning. Women (10 out of 20) ranked health impacts as their second environmental concern from a list of 13 items, preceded by "nature destruction". Men (7 of 23) from the same organisation ranked health only in fourth position.

Finally, when the members were asked their opinion on the statement «Health risks is what worries me most about environmental problems», most women in case 1 and case 2 agreed or strongly agreed (13 out of 15 in case 1 and 17 out of 20 in case 2). Men's opinions were less unanimous in the same organisations; 14 out of 18 men in case 1, and 16 out of 23 men in case 2.

During interviews with female members of the experience-based organisation mobilised against the high tension power line (case 1), the women pointed to arguments constructed from female-specific life experiences when speaking about health. For example, Engracia, a secondary teacher in her forties, explained her concern of the health risks associated with the high tension power line as follows: «A family who lives close to us has a daughter who is at the same course as mine. They are the same age. The mother of this girl has a cancer. At that time [when the conflict took place] she was recovered in the hospital. Then you hear about scientific studies [in relation to electromagnetic fields] which point to children leukaemia, cancers... everything! We lived this specific case from very close, because that girl also plays basket with mine... And that family are the ones who have the [high tension power line] tower closer! They have the tower so close that if it would fall down, it would go into their living room!» (Engracia, 2004).

Some female activists from case 2 showed similar female-based opinions in relation to health impacts of environmental problems. For instance, when asking Àngels about her motives for enrolling in *Salvem l'Empordà*, she answered: «The problem with pork farms annoys me quite a lot, because they are poisoning us. I can tolerate some issues more than others; because I think they do not have such strong impacts on our health. But this one is affecting us!» (Àngels, 2004).

The results of the interviews with the activists in case 1 suggested that the argument of health was strong enough to mobilise people who would not otherwise react

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<sup>7</sup> People that initially mobilised were mainly landowners affected by the construction of the high tension power line. A concern for the conservation of local territory was also common between the founders of the organisation. However, fears about the potential health risks of the high tension power line emerged early. The health argument believed by many members of the organisation helped its consolidation.

(Montserrat I, 2004; Montserrat II, 2004. This is particularly relevant for women, if, as mentioned before, we consider that they have a lower involvement than men in other organisations related to local development (e.g. political parties or ecologist organisations). Significantly, potential health risks for the local population also motivated women activists in *Coordinadora Antilínia de les Gavarres* to make a database, based on their own knowledge, of neighbourhoods affected by high tension power lines. Their original plan was to pass on information of the health risks associated with electromagnetic fields to the affected households (Engracia, 2004).

Results from the enquiries of case 1 and 2 also revealed quality of life was a relevant issue for female members. Quality of life was an important issue for campaigning in case 2, *Salvem l'Empordà*. Women (19 out of 20) showed a stronger concern than men (16 out of 23) when asked if they agreed with the opinion that, «The reduction of quality of life is what worries me most about environmental problems». In case 1, *Coordinadora Antilínia de les Gavarres*, more women (13 out of 15) than men (12 out of 18) also agreed with the opinion mentioned above.

The specific standpoint from which women view environmental problems was evident throughout the interviews with female members of experience-based organisations (cases 1 and 2), when relating to the issues of “environmental heritage left to future generations” and “degradation of the landscape”. When reflecting on their environmental activism most women mentioned a primary concern with the environment in relation to the environment that their sons, daughters and nephews would inherit. For instance, when asking Marina, a housewife in her forties, about her motives for engaging in the organisation she answered «The thought that... I have daughters, if one day they would tell me “See, all this was not here before, we used to come here to pick up mushrooms, to walk, and one day they built all that!”, and that they would say “and did anyone do anything to prevent this?” (...) I will do all I can, I will do all in my hands to stop it!» (Marina, 2004). A similar opinion was expressed by Carme, an architect in her forties, who is an activist from the organisation in case 2: «I think [women] are worried about the future we'll leave to our kids. I'm concerned with the idea my grandchildren meet things for which I've felt emotion, and they may not meet them...» (Carme, 2004).

Interestingly, all interviewed women who belonged to case 2 expressed a strong interest for social issues (Àngels, 2004; Anna, 2004; Barbara, 2004; Carme, 2004; Glòria, 2004; Lidia, 2004; Marta I, 2004; Marta II, 2004; Montse, 2004; Mixo, 2004; Xandra, 2004). Women mentioned their commitment with the social compromise of *Salvem l'Empordà's* fight. In some cases women explicitly mentioned they were not interested in “nature-oriented” organisations (e.g., bird-watching) (Xandra, 2004). Some of them also commented that they would have involved themselves in other social causes (e.g. women's rights groups) if stopping the environmental degradation of Empordà would have been less urgent (Àngels, 2004; Glòria, 2004).

Finally, although the results from the enquiries didn't point to women having a higher concern for the conservation of the landscape than their male counterparts, women showed a very specific feminine feeling and experience of the living environment when referring to this argument during the interviews. For instance, Lidia, an art crafts woman in her forties, expressed: «When I was a child my mother brought me to the river to clean clothes. I was too small to rest at home and she used to tie me to a tree with a rope. (...) From there I could see the stream flowing and clean basins. I've grown with that. I've no children, but if I would have them I would be even more furious!» (Lidia, 2004).

The importance of the landscape for women's everyday life was also expressed by Carme: «Where are we [our family] going this weekend? Where are we going for a walk? We go to the mouth of the river Fluvià. In summer, where are we having a bath? In Cap Ras beach. Many places are part of our everyday life, they are important for our quality of life, and suddenly they all disappear» (Carme, 2004).

### **Women are not a group! Acknowledging differences between women**

Women in the ideology-based organisation, case 3, showed different opinions from women in experience-based ones. Moreover, the number of women highlighting health and quality of life were similar to the numbers of men in the three organisations; and when giving reasons for their alignment to the citizens committee conflicts, women pointed to an ideological argument stronger than their male counterparts.

From case 3, the number of female members (8 out of 13), were similar to the number of male members (13 out of 19) with the opinion «Health risks is what worries me most about environmental problems». Quality of life is a main argument for the fight of *Salvem les Valls*, as explained in a previous section. When asking about their agreement with the opinion «The reduction of quality of life is what worries me most about environmental problems», both women (11 out of 13) and men (16 out of 19) answered positively.

In addition, when the members were asked to point to the three arguments from a list of 11 items, that explained their initial reasons for mobilisation for the cause of *Salvem les Valls*, all women (13 out of 13) correlated with the ideological argument that fuels their actions «I thought that the infrastructure didn't represent a good model of development and progress for Catalonia». That unanimity was not observed for the other options selected by the women in second and third positions; eight pointed to the fact that the infrastructure was an aggression to the local environment and seven were concerned with impacts on the landscape.

Male opinions on the question of the original reasons for enrolling in the citizens' committee were more balanced between diverse options; 14 out of 19 highlighted the model of development embodied by the infrastructure whilst 12 pointed that it was an aggression to the local environment and 11 were worried about the impacts on the quality of life.

Why do women in the ideology-based organisation show different tendencies in their environmental concerns from women in the experience-based ones? Does it demonstrate gender differences are not relevant for interpreting citizens concerns with the environment?

As mentioned above, women in the ideology-based organisations showed a different sociological profile to the women in the experience-based organisations. In *Salvem les Valls* (case 3), the dominant age-ranges of women were 21-20 (7 out of 13) and 31-40 (5 out of 13) years old. Opposite results were obtained for case 1 in which nearly all women were between 41-50 and 51-60 years old. In case 2, ages were distributed from 21 to 60 years old, but women were mainly between 41-50 years old (8 out of 19). Significantly, women in *Salvem les Valls* were not only very young, they were also highly educated<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Education might not be a variable sufficient to explain the different concerns between females in the organisations under study; women with low and medium levels of education were numerous in case 1, but

According to these sociological profiles, we could hypothesise that in comparison to the ideology-based organisation, more women in the experience-based organisations may have traditional gender responsibilities related to the carer role. This hypothesis would explain women's concerns on health and quality of life, as well as their female standpoint when reflecting on the environment left to future generations, or when expressing the social value of landscape.

Differences among women that emerged in the case studies illustrate that women are not a group and cannot be treated as such. Women constitute more than half of the world's population and any culture and society. Women live in very different economic and geographical contexts, and have very diverse opportunities and choices in terms of education, religion, sexuality, profession, etc. (Lorde, 1984). This female diversity may also lead to diverse interests and perspectives on the local environment.

Although historical, cultural, social, economic and/or ecological local variables may help to explain differences among women regarding their environmental concerns, these variations do not invalidate gender as a major cultural and social mechanism that explains female and male specific concerns with the environment. Gender social roles were already indicated to be an interpretation of women's specific views on the environment. Other interpretations point to the 'powerless' or 'intermediate' position of women in society.

Sociologists in the US have found that white males are the social group which perceives to a lesser extent the negative impacts derived from industrial and highly developed societies. This tendency is interpreted by stating that women and non-white males are those who have been at the margins of power in society, and thus are more critical with regards to the negative effects related to the dominant development path (Finucane et al. 2000, Flynn et al. 1994).

It has also been said that women are symbolically in an intermediate position between nature and culture, which would explain the secondary status of women in society: «woman's physiology, more involved more of the time with "species life"; woman's association with the structurally subordinate domestic context, charged with the crucial function of transforming animal-like infants into culture beings; "women's psyche", appropriately moulded to mothering functions by her own socialisation and tending toward greater personalism and less mediated roles of relating- (...).» (Ortner, 1974: 250). This (conceptual) nature-culture intermediate position and the (genuine) secondary status of 'femininity' may provide women with a standpoint for looking at environmental controversies.

## **Conclusions: towards non-gendered participatory processes**

The main objective of this paper has been to argue that gender is relevant to environment-related participatory processes because differences exist between the environmental concerns of men and women.

The relations between women, nature and the environment through Ecofeminist theories have been explored. Empirical evidence about women's and men's preferences on science and technology issues have been demonstrated by the Spanish survey carried out in 2004. We have also illustrated differences in environmental concerns

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medium and mainly highly educated females were common in case 2. The profile of young, highly educated women may provide a basis for the proposed hypothesis.

between men and women by analysing three citizens' committees for environmental conflicts in the north-east of Catalonia, Spain.

Throughout the article we have also pointed to other parallel arguments that may help to increase our understanding of the gender dimension in environmental issues. Firstly, we highlighted the gender gap between the high interest of women in information related to medicine and health, and food and consumption, and their low interest in information on the environment and ecology and in science and technology-related books and magazines. We pointed to the hypothesis that this tendency is a consequence of the abstract, strong technical and little social and local awareness that traditionally dominant scientific approaches to the environment have had.

The lack of interest in mainstream environment-related scientific information showed by Spanish females leads to other reflections that point directly to the role of scientific knowledge in participatory processes. The hypothesis that mainstream scientific knowledge may not address the interests of many Spanish women illustrates the relevance of addressing the gender-neutrality of information provided in the context of a participatory process. Some questions to develop this assessment could be; whose perspectives and values are addressed by the research activity? Which arguments are receiving scientific support? Is there a gender bias in policy knowledge involved in the participation process?

Secondly, we indicated that women have a specific standpoint when looking at environmental problems. The results of the experience-based organisations illustrated that women not only showed specific concerns, i.e., health, quality of life, environmental legacy left to future generations and degradation of the landscape, they also referred to women's life experiences for arguing their own opinions.

In contrast, we also noted that women in the ideology-based organisations showed specific tendencies which differed to those of the women in experience-based organisations. This finding led to a third argument developed in this paper; differences among women should be also acknowledged. We pointed that historical, cultural, social, economic and/or ecological local variables could explain variations in women's environmental concerns.

These final points lead us to detailed reflections on the conceptualisation and recognition of differences among citizens; an implicit risk in the recognition of difference is that we (re)construct identities that are alien to people's reality, e.g. we should not expect women's opinions to be homogenous and that they will inevitably express high interests on health and quality of life, and give little attention to ideology-based argumentations. Simplistic and deterministic approaches to difference should be avoided.

However, we should not undervalue the role of gender in moulding our environmental views. Arguments for explaining the specificity of female environmental concerns were discussed at the beginning and at the end of this paper and two interpretations have been proposed. On the one hand, we referred to the social role of carer being traditionally assigned to women. On the other hand, we argued that women's 'powerless' and 'nature-culture intermediate' position in society may lead to a specific outlook on environmental problems.

The concluding reflections indicate that developing practical mechanisms to recognise the relevance of gender in citizens' opinions about the environment, and to give women (and men) the power to bring their own (non-alienated) views into the

discussion and decision-making process is one of the main challenges of participatory initiatives when aiming to promote non-gendered, plural, inclusive and more efficient governance practices.

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