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Revisiting gender ecology and eco-feminism: A profile of five contemporary women water activists

Lliane Loots

“The water cycle connects us all and from water we can learn the path of peace and the way of freedom. We can learn how to transcend water wars created by greed, waste, and injustice, which create scarcity in our water abundant planet. We can work within the water cycle to reclaim water abundance. We can work together to create water democracies. And if we build democracy, we build peace” (Shiva, 2002a: xv).

The above quote by Indian feminist and Earth activist, Vandana Shiva, is a pertinent reminder of the centrality of water within a paradigm of both human and gendered rights, and the centrality of water within the contemporary debates around globalisation, ownership and corporate (often private) governance of the Earth’s resources. More important, however, is her framing of water within the rights of what she often refers to as Earth Democracy.1 Her call, echoed by numerous eco-feminists2, is one that seeks to look at how the Earth’s resources, water being one of the most fundamental, form part of an interconnected chain that cannot be separated from how we conceptualise modern democracy.

Shiva’s notion of Earth Democracy is an active feminist endeavour to deepen the concept of democracy to include all life forms. Earth Democracy claims the intrinsic worth and equality of all species, the diversity in nature and culture, the need for us to balance our belief in human rights with responsibilities to the sustenance of the Earth, such that those who make decisions in our societies also bear the consequences of these decisions. The phrase ‘Earth Democracy’ has begun to emerge in several environmental discourses propagated by, for example, the Gaia Foundation.2 It is even alluded to in the Earth Charter which calls for fundamental changes in our values, institutions, and ways of living. Yet the concept is hardly ever made reference to in the (South) African and developmental contexts.

In an Earth Democracy there is no space for exploitation either of ourselves as humans - as men and women - or of the earth and its resources; water being the most essential. As Thomas Berry (1999:83), a foremost advocate of Earth Democracy has said, “Our own well-being is dependent on the well-being of the Earth.” Expressed in this way, Earth Democracy is the new feminist agenda for the 21st century.

As feminists, our activisms should not only include fighting for gender, race and class equity (as hooks [1986] has so importantly stated), but should also begin to include a commitment to re-imagine a planet where all life forms, human and non-human, find themselves protected and their rights enshrined. How would we, for example, begin to imagine an Earth Democracy that allowed a river its intrinsic rights? The contemporary debates around dams (a huge arena of gendered water struggle for women in developing countries) thus begins to take on another dimension around primarily a revised legal, social and political system that seeks to challenge the increasing corporate and private ownership of a resource like water. Much like our abhorrence as gender activists to the idea of the global trafficking of women, this notion of buying and selling women in a sex trade that strips women not only of their dignity but also of their democratic rights, an Earth Democracy...
challenges us to see (for example) water, rivers, forests, in a similar way. The private ownership of water and the corporate and political control (and selling) of water and rivers becomes nothing more than the trafficking of the Earth’s resources that benefits an abusive global elite.

Earth Democracy and its cognate new understanding of jurisprudence thus asks of feminisms, the need to not only consider human (male and female) equity and rights, but our place, as men and women, in a larger scheme of power relations that includes, as Berry says, “the well-being of the Earth” (1999:83).

The gendering of this debate is of course the way globally, we begin to understand that it is women who are usually responsible for domestic water provision. This said, it is also important to recognise that “women do not constitute an homogenous group but they themselves bear the burdens of race, class and national power relations which impact on how there is further marginalisation within social and economic water provision and access”. It is, however, women’s needs and voices that continue to be marginalised in most development process that seeks to address, for example, access to water. Close analysis of current policy and practice in South Africa, for example, shows that governmental organisations providing improved water supply and access to poor rural black communities typically neglect the gendered nature of access to and control over water resources. The resulting gender bias causes inefficiencies and injustices in water provision and reduces the effectiveness of well-meant efforts.

Much feminist debate within the discourses around the gendering of water, thus address this notion of access to water, and while this is indeed a very important and essential aspect of creating debate around gender, development and poverty, and gender and water, the gendered debate around access is only part of a greater debate that Earth Democracy alerts us to and this is the largesse of framing gender debates around water within a paradigm that seeks to fundamentally address the fact that water is a finite resource and a resource that should be afforded the legal framework of ecological protection. This should be done as an act of gendered self-preservation and indeed, preservation of the Earth.

Understanding the ecology of water is to return back to the hydrological cycle where water is received by an ecosystem as rain or snow. Falling moisture is what recharges streams, rivers, and groundwater. This water ‘donation’ that is part of a particular ecosystem is dependant on the region’s unique climate, vegetation and geology. It is at each of these levels that humanity has intervened and abused the Earth by destroying its capacity to receive, absorb and store water. Deforestation and mining, for example, have destroyed the ability of natural water catchments to retain water. Modern monoculture agriculture and forestry with plantations of alien trees (in South Africa, millions of hectares of pine and eucalyptus trees) have sucked ecosystems dry. And the ever increasing use of fossil fuels has landed us globally in a situation of atmospheric pollution which is playing havoc with our climates and, hence the upsurge of recurrent floods and alternately droughts.

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Gender activists and eco-feminists have increasingly begun to look at how processes of contemporary globalisation have begun to support the above mentioned defilement of the Earth, and women's - particularly poor women's - access to water. Shiva (2002a) has pointed out that in India (for example) most indigenous communities have worked with the principle of "collective water rights and management" (2002a:12) where the key to sustainability was to communally create rules and limits on water usage. When corporations move into poor rural communities and ‘development’ processes begin to erode community control of resources like water, Shiva (2002a) has noted that governments begin to promote technology as a solution to water scarcity. For example, as rivers dry up (for reasons stated above) technology is used to build bigger wells and water pumps - digging deeper and using
more hydrocarbon power to suck water, and the net result is groundwater famine. These World Bank and (often) development agency favoured methods of water provision through faulty technological ‘solutions’ for rural poor communities in the developing South, finally give way to the aggressive pushing of the privatisation and market-based distribution of water. This is, of course, the ultimate step of undermining not only the collective sustainable water’s rights of a local community, but it is the ultimate ownership and trafficking of water; it is the ultimate undermining of the intrinsic right of water to exercise its own connectivity to ecological democracy. For, when water disappears, as Shiva (2002a:15) points out, “For Third World women, (this) means traveling longer distances in search of water. For peasants, it means starvation and destitution as drought wipes out their crops. For children it means dehydration and death.”

Increasingly gender water activists have begun to remind us of the fundamental (ecological) questions that surround water: Who does water belong to? Is it private property or, as argued above, collective commons? What rights do people have in relation to water? What are the rights of the state, and what are the rights of corporations? Most germane to these questions is the eco-feminist and deep ecology notion that water has its own rights within an Earth Democracy. With the increasing global mismanagement of the Earth, seen as a commodity and as exploitable resource, our water crisis is worsening and within this is a renewed global economic effort by global corporations and super-powers, to redefine water, from commons to commodity. More succinctly put, water is now being economically considered as private goods that can be extracted and traded (trafficked?) freely.

That this is also a gendered debate has been the activism of many stalwart and pioneering contemporary feminists who have taken the gendered Earth fight over water into a global arena that has seen these women taking on global corporations, patriarchal political regimes and corporate capital. The remaining part of this Perspective focuses on profiling five of these women activists who have placed water at the forefront of their gendered fight for democracy. This is done in the feminist agenda of re-writing ‘herstory’ and placing women’s activist endeavours in the foreground, but it is also an eco-feminist act of honoring women who have placed their lives on the patriarchal firing line to support a true Earth Democracy by understanding that, fundamentally, water rights are about a larger understanding of a gender democracy that is not only human-centred.

VANDANA SHIVA
(India)
Vandana Shiva is a world renowned environmental activist, feminist and mother of the concept of ‘Earth Democracy’. A leader in the International Forum on Globalisation, Shiva has been awarded the Alternate Nobel Peace Prize (the Right Livelihood Award) in 1993. She
is best known for her stalwart fight for the rights of primarily poor women farmers in India and the fight against corporate control of seed by American based Genetically Modified Organism (GMO) companies like Monsanto. She is a widely published author and has tackled head-on governments and corporate capital in their bids to ‘own’ and sell (traffic) the Earth in the form of water control and privatisation. She has tirelessly fought to expose the destruction of the Earth and the disenfranchisement of the world’s poor (mostly female) as they are stripped - by governments and corporations - of their right to precious commons such as water.

In her “Nine Principles of Water Democracy” (Shiva, 2002a:35), she states as Principle seven:

“7. Water is a commons: Water is not a human invention. It cannot be bound and has no boundaries. It is by nature a commons. It cannot be owned as private property and sold as a commodity.”

This fight to keep water out of the control of corporations and in the hands of local communities who need it and access it as commons, has meant that Shiva has vocally tackled the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) whose structural adjustment programmes often require the privatisation of water as a loan conditionality, all of this under the rubric of ‘free trade’. Water has become big business for global corporations who see limitless market potential in a water scarce and plundered Earth. Over and above this, the privatisation of water services (treatment, supply etc) means that poor local communities no longer have any say in the governance of their commons and are, as Shiva points out (2002a), further disenfranchised.

In Shiva’s own words:

“It is so clear: the world is running out of fresh water. Humanity is polluting, diverting, and depleting the wellspring of life at a startling rate. Over a billion people currently lack access to a basic water supply, while several billion do not have access to adequate sanitation. Every eight seconds, somewhere in the world, a child dies of water-borne disease. If current trends continue, two thirds of the people on the planet will not have adequate access to clean water by the year 2025. Women and children are most affected. Despite water’s critical importance to our survival, access to fresh water is far from equal or guaranteed. Global water corporations, international financial institutions, trade agreements, even some governments have been promoting privatisation and commodification of water as the solution to this crisis. But the evidence clearly shows that privatisation leads to rising water rates, unclean water – and soaring corporate profits. Water should be safe, affordable and accessible to everyone, not just those who can afford to pay. That is why, around the world, civil society movements are collectively pushing to have the right to water recognised through a binding international treaty. Clean water for drinking, hygiene, sanitation and agriculture is a precondition for the achievement of other rights and of many globally-set development goals targeting both men and women.

Around the world, women and girls bear the prime responsibility for collecting water for washing, cooking, cleaning, drinking and sanitation. In rural areas, up to one-third of a woman’s time can be spent fetching water and traversing physically rough terrain. On average, girls will walk approximately 6 kilometres a day to fetch water. Women may carry up to 20kg of water on their heads on each excursion. Not only does the responsibility of collecting water represent an important expenditure of energy, it also places important demands on women and girls’ time; time that could be spent in school or on income-producing activities. In Africa, up to 10% of girls drop out of school once they begin menstruating due to lack of
appropriate sanitation facilities. In this way, the time spent collecting water, and lack of sanitation facilities increases women’s inequality by continuing the cycle of illiteracy and poverty. Women and young girls are also subject to violence and attacks when walking to and from water sources through isolated areas.

Water justice is an issue that cuts across many sectors. It engages organisations focused on trade, environment, finance, social justice and human rights. It touches people on an emotional and spiritual level. The right to water entitles every individual to have access to adequate water and it is the state’s obligation to do everything possible to realise this right for everybody, without discrimination, and on a not-for profit basis. Where states fail to carry out this duty, the Human Right’s perspective makes it possible to hold them accountable for it. Concerned citizens in South and North have formed a global resistance to the privatisation of their water and are leading the way to a water-secure world. Securing a convention on the right to water would provide another tool to help women secure their rights and provide for their families. Clearly, the right to water is an idea whose time has come!” (Blue Planet Project, NDb).

MEDHA PATKAR
(India)

Born in Bombay in 1953, Medha Patkar’s life’s work has become synonymous with the eco-feminist environmental fight in India against big dams, specifically the dam project along the Narmada Valley - the world’s largest dam project. So vociferous has been her fight that she has raised the profile of global understandings around the politics of water and rivers, and how corporations and governments begin to control water through the building of dams. Her concern is that community control of water is eroded when states and governments (and increasingly corporations through the privatisation of water) take control over water resources. Patkar has pointed out that in Third World countries, government’s control of water, out of the hands of communities and the poor (mostly women), has been the facilitation of giant water projects that have been part of - in the case of India - structural adjustment loan conditionalities from the World Bank. Dams have become the particularly popular means of shifting water control from communities to central governments. Not only do dams take the control of water away from communities, but dams are ecologically an unsound way of colonising rivers and water. World Bank development initiatives have argued that large water projects like dams are about “augmenting water” (Shiva, 2002a:56) but in reality, as activists like Patkar have made clear, dams simply take water away from one community to give to another, take water away from one eco-system to give to another. Patkar’s activist’s fight is that water is most often taken away from the poor to supplement the lives of the rich and affluent, from rural areas to be sent to urban areas. This has lead to what is often called ‘the water wars’ where communities begin to fight with each other, governments and, increasingly, corporations around the right to access ‘their’ commons.

Patkar has dedicated her life to the protests against the damming of the Narmada Valley. The damming of the Narmada project consists of 30 large, 135 medium and 3 000 minor dams along the Narmada river and its tributaries. It is expected to up-root over one million people, submerge 350 000 hectares of indigenous forest, drown 200 000 hectares of...
cultivable land at the cost of 52 billion dollars (Shiva 2002a:64).

Patkar’s original fight was one for just settlements for the displaced people, but the protest soon evolved into showing up major environmental controversy that called into question not only the methods of compensation for evicted people but also the very logic of building dams altogether. This fight for the ecological imperative of the protection of nature has become about the rights of survival for forests, rivers and land.

Veteran of several fasts, monsoon satyagrahas on the banks of the rising Narmada, Patkar’s uncompromising insistence on the right to life and livelihood has compelled the post-Independence generation in India (as well as globally) to revisit the basic questions of the relationship between natural resources, human and gender rights, environment, and development. Facing police beatings and many jail terms on the way, she has taken on speaking for the poor disenfranchised dalit (translated: untouchable caste) women and peasant farmers (most of whom are women) in the creation of the National Alliance of People’s Movements - a non-electoral and secular political alliance opposed to globalisation. Her (and many other activists along with her, Arundhati Roy being the most famous) victory with the massive people’s movement that it generated, was to force the World Bank out of the Narmada Valley dam project.

In Patkar’s (The Hindu, 2007) own words (addressing women living in the slums of New Delhi),

“If people like you, who consume not more than 40 liters of water a day, do not get access to it, Government has no right to be in power.”

Hubbie Hussein Al-Haji

(Kenya)

Born into a rural ethnic Somali community in Garissa, a town in an arid region of Northern Kenya, Hubbie Hussein Al-Haji is a Muslim woman who has taken on the activist fight within her own community. Perhaps most renowned for her outspoken voice against gender based violence and the world-wide attention she drew to the traditional practice of female genital cutting or mutilation (FGM), Al-Haji has said (CEDPA, 2006) that “A Somali woman was supposed to be seen and not heard, now however, I’m being heard.” Unique in her gender struggle has been her ability to connect issues around women’s lived reality and the violence they face in their personal lives, with an understanding that areas of conflict in developing countries give rise to fighting over resources that are made worse by clan and factional fighting. She maintains that access to water is one of the fundamental ways in which rural and poor women’s lives can be improved.

As ‘development’ agendas took hold of Kenya, Al-Haji watched as government took control of water supplies and, as the population of Kenya’s urban centres steadily grow, she saw the logging with its deforestation to clear land for homes and the mono crop agriculture, and the overuse of water supplies that these industries require. Kenya was increasingly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, and then the onset of more erratic rainfall patterns coupled with longer periods of drought. Al-Haji watched (once again) the scenario play out where water as commons is wrestled out of the hands of the people (usually poor, rural and female), to eventually become ‘owned’ by national state interests or by private corporations.

Al-Haji’s fight has not been, like Shiva and Patkar in India, to take on corporations
and larger government process, instead her activism has been for women to be represented on management forums that make local and national decisions around water management.

“Women in Kenya overwhelmingly bare the brunt of an inadequate water supply, often carrying heavy containers for long distances in adverse conditions to bring home water for their families. Until recently, though, their opinions were not heard on male-dominated water committees” (ReliefWeb, 2010).

Advocating water reforms from the bottom up, Al-Haji soon became the executive director of WomenKind Kenya, and was unanimously voted onto Garissa’s water board in September 2010. She has tirelessly fought for reforms in water management not only in her own town, but for women in all rural communities in Kenya, and is one of the few gender activists whose voice is heard in the fight around the politics of water.

Campaigning for water reform as a key to women’s self determination, Al-Haji’s fight has been to get women’s groups across Kenya to fight for the decentralisation of decision making around water. So powerful has been her lobby that in 2002, Kenya embarked on a process of water reform – a process which is still on-going.

“Women now have better access to seats on committees, have a bigger say in decision making and can campaign more effectively for changes in water provision at the local and national level to try and ensure women get a constant supply of clean water” (ibid).

In Al-Haji’s own words:

“For a long time, Kenyan women have looked on helplessly and have had to live with inadequate water services. Now, since the start of the country’s water reform project, we are beginning to campaign for change. ...The daily...trek in search for 20 litres of water for a family of eight will soon be history” (ibid).

Maude Barlow (Canada)

Canadian Maude Barlow’s name has become synonymous with what is now termed the ‘global water justice movement’ and the activist fight to build resistance to the growing corporate takeover of the world’s water. Her activist fight has been to insist that world leadership forums recognise water as a human right. Barlow has been hugely vocal around the way in which water rights have been omitted from both the original United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. She argues that this has hampered the fight for water justice and has allowed private interests and corporate capital to now determine the fate of the world’s water (Blue Planet Project, ND). She, and her Blue Planet Project, have tirelessly lobbied the United Nations towards a more binding legal framework that begins to emphasise the right to water as a cornerstone for all other human (and gender) rights. As Barlow has said:

“The human rights approach (to water) stresses above all the responsibilities of the state: The right to water entitles every individual to have access to adequate water and it is the state’s obligation to do everything possible to realise this for everybody, without discrimination, and on a not-for-profit basis. Where states fail to carry out this duty, the human rights perspective makes it possible to hold them accountable for it. Access to
adequate water thus is discussed not only as a moral, but also as a political and legal claim" (Barlow, 2006).

Within this human rights framework, Barlow has tackled the gender politics of water alongside the class politics of who has (and will have in the future) access to clean water. Her argument is that if we are truly to understand, as Shiva has pointed out, water as a commons, then access to water, by the poor (usually female) can begin to be addressed as an activist fight towards a true democracy.

As Barlow points out:

“Tragically, many of the world’s most powerful economic and political elites do not believe that the world’s dwindling freshwater stocks are the collective heritage of humanity, but a kind of ‘Blue Gold’ which is theirs to plunder. ‘Water hunters’ are scouring the planet for new sources of water. Last year, bottling companies put close to 170 billion liters of fresh water into plastic bottles, creating a massive new source of pollution. If only half of the US$100 billion that the world’s wealthy spent on bottled water in 2005 had been spent on infrastructure and treatment, every human being in the world would have clean drinking water today. Other transnational water corporations, the largest of which are among the wealthiest male-owned corporations on the planet, are wresting control from local governments to deliver water on a for-profit basis to those who can pay, and denying it to those who cannot – usually poor women. Not content to run the once public utilities for their private profit, some are now buying whole river systems, controlling and even denying vital water supplies to untold millions. This has given rise to a mighty contest. On one side: The global water industry, composed of for-profit water service companies and bottled water giants; international financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, who have made the privatisation of water a conditionality of their loans to Third World countries in the global South; the World Trade Organisation, which protects the interests of the water companies through legally binding enforcement measures; and many First World governments, who are promoting the interests of their private corporations over the needs and rights of the world’s - usually poor and female - people” (ibid).

To deal with this, Barlow argues that we need to convince governments that water is a Human Rights issue that needs to be based on four fundamental principles:

1. Water commons – that water belongs to the earth and all species and must be understood for all time to be a universal common trust;

2. Water justice – that water is a fundamental human right to be distributed equitably as a public service and never appropriated for profit;

3. Water stewardship – that water must be conserved and renewed, rather than wasted contaminated and depleted, and that humanity must once again respect water’s sacred place within the natural world;

4. Water democracy – that water management decisions must involve local community participation because local stewardship, not private business, expensive technology or government alone, is the best safeguard for a water-secure future” (ibid).

Barlow (Democracy Now, 2008) has also been unique in how she has linked the climate change debates to activism around water:

“we always hear that climate change - and that is, greenhouse gas-induced climate change - is affecting water, which is true - melting glaciers and all of that. But I am trying to put a new wrinkle, if you will, into the whole debate. It’s kind of - I call it the inconvenient truth of water - and that is that our abuse, pollution, misplacement, displacement and just mismanagement of water is actually one of the causes of climate change. And it’s a really different kind of way of looking at it.”

Finally in Barlow’s words (Democracy Now, 2010):

“We are polluting our lakes, rivers and streams to death. Every day, two million tons of sewage and industrial agriculture waste are discharged into the world’s
water. That’s the equivalent of the entire human population of 6.8 billion people. The amount of wastewater produced annually is about six times more water than exists in all the rivers of the world. We are mining our groundwater faster than we can replenish it, sucking it to grow water-guzzling, chemical-fed crops in deserts or to water thirsty cities who dump an astounding 700 trillion liters of land-based water into oceans every year as waste. The global mining industry sucks up another 800 trillion litres, which it also leaves behind as poison. And fully one-third of global water withdrawals are now used to produce biofuels, enough water to feed the world. Nearly three billion people on our planet do not have running water within a kilometer of their home, and every eight seconds, somewhere in our world, a child is dying of waterborne disease. The global water crisis is getting steadily worse, with reports of countries, from India to Pakistan to Yemen, facing depletion. The World Bank says that by 2030, demand for water will outstrip supply by 40 per cent. This may sound just like a statistic, but the suffering behind that - primarily by the world’s poor women - is absolutely unspeakable.”

Asaha Elizabeth Ufei
(Cameroon)

Asaha Elizabeth Ufei’s activist voice became a prominent one in December of 2009 in Copenhagen (Denmark) at the forum around Climate Change/Climate Justice. Her impassioned narrating of the lives of black women in rural Cameroon’s Momo Division of the Northwest Province, forced a much needed link to be made between women, gender and climate change.

Ufei explained that the traditional gender roles and expectations of women and girls lay the burdens of home management, childcare, providing food, water and income solidly on female and girl-childs’ backs. At the same time, women and girls are often forced into marriages, lose all property rights, endure violence in their homes, have little to no power in their homes and communities unless men permit it, and often have little to no education or resources (McKinney, 2009).

Ufei goes on:

“As the climate conditions worsen, women are finding it harder to provide food and water for their families. The once reliable and nearby water sources are drying up or contaminated; and the crops aren’t producing enough. So we are faced with questions: How many more miles must women have to walk to provide basic life-sources? What other ways can women sustain their families when the traditional agriculture and craft materials are gone? How many women will have to uproot their families and migrate to other places - that may be hostile to immigrants - because they can longer find food and shelter in their communities? How many more women and girls will be pushed into survival sex work because there are fewer economic opportunities? How many more people who speak up about human rights and organise for change will be severely punished, coerced to leave their countries, or forever silenced?” (ibid).

Ufei’s story illuminates the all too common experience of women in rural Africa. The mirror she painfully held up at the Copenhagen 2009 talks reminded many in the ‘developed world’ of the desperate conditions women in the ‘developing’ South, are increasingly facing as this climate crisis advances unabated.

Some concluding comments

This is, by no means an exhaustive list of women activists who work within the contemporary politics of water, but five who frame some of the global debates around understanding gender and its relationship to water within the framework of environmental justice and democracy. Mention can also be made of China’s Wang Yongchen who has become a great warrior for free rivers in what is fast becoming the biggest industrialised economic super power globally. Yongchen is a senior reporter with China National Radio and founder of Green Earth Volunteers. Wang has been called an ‘environmental poet’ as she has spent her lifetime making poetry out of the places she visits with her camera, pen and recorder. She has been deeply vocal about China’s plans...
to dam up rivers and has pointed out (Yan, 2011:5):

"Women in China are also often the most negatively impacted by large dam projects. They lose the land, their cultural tradition and their livelihood, particularly those who are part of ethnic minorities. Their lives are urbanised, and they shoulder more of the burdens after the men have gone to work in cities."

In the Chinese context, Yongchen led an unprecedented public campaign to save the Nu River, which flows from the Tibetan Plateau, and becomes the Salween in Burma and Thailand. It is one of China’s last free-flowing rivers. In July 2003, China’s ‘three parallel rivers region’ - encompassing the basins of the Jinsha, Lancang and Nu rivers - was added to UNESCO’s World Natural Heritage list. In August, the National Development and Reform Commission passed a plan to construct a cascade of 13 hydropower stations on the Nu. In response, Wang rallied support for protecting the Nu by organising seminars, engaging fellow journalists, distributing pamphlets, and organising a petition to call for an environmental and legal evaluation of the hydropower projects (ibid).

Despite Yangchen and the Green Earth Volunteer’s victory in 2004 around the Nu River, China’s upcoming Five-Year Plan, due to be published at the end of March 2011, calls for the renewed construction of large hydro projects like those on the Nu River, which have lain dormant for several years. The Chinese government proposes to approve new hydropower capacity from dams that are almost twice what the United States, Brazil or Canada have built in their entire histories. Her group will continue fighting to keep these rivers free flowing for generations to come, mindful of the severe destruction to the lives of primarily poor rural women that these dam projects cause.

What finally needs to remain within our consciousness as activists is the significance of the issues that the stalwart women profiled have struggled to defend, and further their deeply important reminder to us, the the concept of ‘water as commons’: That however patriarchy and globalisation conspire, water must remain a universal common that belongs to the Earth and all species equally. As governments and first world corporations move to own, privatise and control water, so our democracy is undermined and indeed, the fight for equitable lives for women, and the world’s poor, continues to be deeply compromised.

**More information**
1. The Blue Planet Project is an organisation committed to supporting global grassroots struggles in the fight for water justice. [www.blueplanetproject.net](http://www.blueplanetproject.net)
2. [www.internationalrivers.org](http://www.internationalrivers.org)

**Notes**
1. See for example, Shiva (2002b) “Paradigm shift: Earth Democracy” in Resurgence, 2/4, September-October.
2. For a detailed account and analysis of eco-feminism see, Witt and Loots (2004).
3. The Gaia Foundation works with individuals, organisations and networks in Africa, South America, Asia and Europe to regenerate healthy ecosystems, enhance traditional knowledge and practices for land, seed, food and water sovereignty, and to strengthen community self-government. This enables communities to become more resilient to climate change and the industrial processes which have caused the many crises we now face. See http://www.gaiafoundation.org/
4. See, for example the Article in this issue of Agenda written by Ndawakhulo Tshishonga and Eva Matema, who painfully open up for consideration the way in which increased neo-liberal water and sanitation provisions in South Africa are not gender neutral and how they in fact entrenched oppressive gender roles for women.
5. See, for example, the Perspective in this issue of Agenda written by Mary Galvin who, through her own work with The Water Dialogues, has offered a case study that shows how many rural communities (and rural women in particular) in South Africa are faced with very real barriers to participation in local issues that pertain to water and sanitation.
7. In the maquiladoras of Mexico, for example, due to World Bank structural adjustment programmes, the favouring of heavy technological extraction of water and the resultant scarcity and drying up of groundwater, has lead to such water scarcity that babies and children are drinking Coca-Cola and Pepsi (Barlow, 2001:8). Coca-Cola has clearly understood that water scarcity is a source of corporate profit; they generate a revenue of an estimated 5.6 billion dollars per annum (Barlow, 2001). Added to this, companies like Coca-Cola have stepped into the bottled water business and begun to effectively generate new markets for ‘clean’ and ‘safe’ drinking water.
8. Shiva (2002a:13) details a good example of this in the state of Gujarat in India when in the 1990’s, after failed technology intensive water extraction processes dried up all ground water, the World Bank (through its structural adjustment programme) began to aggressively market the privatisation of water as a solution to water scarcity.
9. “In Ghana, for example, World Bank and IMF loan conditional policies forced the sale of water at market rates required the poor to spend up to 50 per cent of their earnings on water purchases” (Shiva, 2002a:92).

10. European water company Vivendi, has an estimated annual turn over of 17.1 billion dollars per annum (Shiva, 2002a) – Vivendi has water business ventures all over Europe, Brazil and Hong Kong (China).

References
Blue Planet Project (NDA) www.blueplanetproject.net, accessed 12 February 2011.