

# Environmental Peacebuilding and Feminist Foreign Policy: Insights Based on the Heritage of India

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26. Oktober 2023 [Neha Khetrupal](#)

Over the course of the past two decades, general interest in the intersections of environment, peace and conflict has increased significantly, especially in response to rapid environmental change and degradation. Scholars and practitioners, interested in these intersections, routinely emphasise the gendered aspects of climate policy-making. These aspects exclude both women and their lived experiences – as an essential part of policy content – from decision-making processes. Furthermore, much of this discourse is reported from the Global North that in turn fails to provide insights to theorists and practitioners in the Global South (e.g. [Khetrupal 2023](#)).

As nation states in the Global South contemplate re-formulating their foreign policy through the feminist lens, it becomes imperative to understand how people and community dwellers in the Global South understand security and – consequently – construe the relationship between conflict and climate-induced scarcities.

## Policies, measures and local actors

While writing on behalf of the Global South as a uniform unit is a complex task, preliminary interactions with people from Western and Northern regions of India show that for them security and cultural heritage are indispensable. This indispensable relationship implies a human-centric conceptualisation of security, as opposed to an approach that puts resources

or economies at the centre of deliberative focus. Environmental degradation and conservation – and closely associated folktales, traditional practices, and community wisdom around conservation – are important aspects for the adherents of the human-centric conceptualisation. For the adherents from Western and Northern Indian regions, embracing a human-centric approach further means placing an emphasis on women and their sociopolitical agency. In other words, moving away from depicting women as mere victims of climate-induced scarcities.

Practitioners and policy-makers often downplay common understandings of security. As nation-states gradually consider the feminist lens for developing their diplomatic endeavours, these local explanations nevertheless assume importance. When it comes to bolstering climate adaptation programs both at the micro and transnational levels, gendered knowledge about conservation and women's lived experiences acquire prominence, too. How do these local experiences inform governmental decision-making and re-calibrate diplomatic endeavours?

## Accumulated gendered knowledge

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India – with her G20 presidency – places emphasis on transforming elite diplomatic events into people's events. During the tenure of the G20 presidency, extensive participation of people from across the nation in different kinds of G20-related activities was visible. While people's opinions and participation mattered at these events, what was less evident was India's accumulated gendered knowledge. This served as an inspiration for the people-centred dialogue that I initiated in a few regions (New Delhi and Alwar, Rajasthan). Orchestrating these dialogues spotlighted accumulated gendered knowledge in the 'apparent' absence of past local actors. This accumulated gendered knowledge is most evident in the form of ancient step wells (a sheltered and deep well with descending levels of steps) that were built in drought-prone areas.

The state of Rajasthan has a long history of droughts due to its topography, which consists of desert and semi-desert areas. The state is also dotted by a large number of step wells (also called *vavs* or *baori*) that were commissioned by women of the royal households in the 18th century from the spatial confines of their royal households and with the help of land revenue at their disposal (see figure 1). Several locals living close to the step wells acknowledge that this architectural patronage has a significant bearing for understanding the influence of women, during a time when they lived away from the public eye.

### Figure 1: A step well in Rajasthan



## Enhancing the sociopolitical agency of women

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While various theorists and practitioners would readily agree that the objectives of feminist foreign policy should go beyond merely increasing the number of women as key decision-makers within the realm of foreign relations, feeding into security issues, I further propose that interacting with marginalised local actors would be of immense value for improving human security (broadly construed). Local actors, their traditions and their architectural remains – encompassing accumulated gendered knowledge – embody an important alternative to patriarchal forms of environmental peacebuilding. The essence of accumulated gendered knowledge – gleaned through step wells – lies in deploying the sociopolitical agency of women.

For scholars and theorists, the theoretical edifice underpinning the sociopolitical agency of women fits the "ethics of care" perspective ([Robinson 2016](#)). Care ethics assume relevance, here, for an associated focus on (social) ontology of relationality and interdependence – targeted at improving adaptive capacities of people and reducing vulnerabilities for communities in the face of climate change or disturbances.

## Generating cross-border dialogues

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Once functional step wells, noted for descending steps that permitted people to navigate fluctuating water-levels, serve as exquisite reminders of architectural 'care' – as opposed to other difficult-to-navigate reservoirs like tanks and wells (see figure 2). The step wells also serve as visible reminders of people's dependency on 'care' that was addressed by the royalty. Royal patronage of water infrastructure, in this manner, catered to the dependent (and the vulnerable) by providing water supplies for fulfilling agricultural needs and for personal consumption. As such, several step wells were built along trade routes that were traversed by travellers and traders.

**Figure 2: The pictured tall structure of this step well in Alwar (Rajasthan) is paired with steps that, in turn, permitted people to descend comfortably under the shade of the pavilion (Photo: N. Khetrapal)**





Photo: N. Khetrapal

For practitioners, feminist care ethics entail creating opportunities for cooperative international exchanges over channelising unique cultural heritage for meeting environmental challenges. Generating cross-border dialogues, in this manner, moves beyond viewing climate change as a multiplier of conflicts and encourages both 'elites' and 'marginalised' actors to share localised solutions and interventions in the interests of larger transnational communities.

## **Inspiration for feminist scholars and practitioners**

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Environmental peacebuilding, within a feminist foreign policy umbrella, does not have a widely acceptable definition. By offering a few observations from Global South (India), the hope is to build both a theoretical framework and repertoire of practice from which feminist scholars and practitioners alike can draw inspiration for formulating attempts at foreign policy-making. While attempts at integrating women and their agency have gained momentum, in this regard, incorporating accumulated gendered knowledge and cultural heritage – both tangible and intangible – opens further avenues for thoughts. This preliminary dialogical investigation also sets the stage for engaging with past local actors (feminists and women) whose opinions, thoughts and sociopolitical agency are only available through material remnants they left behind.

## **Literatur**


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