



When the Earth Cried: Women and Environmental Injustice

By Regina Mutiru. Edited by Helena Zelic. Source: Capire.

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The article shares the experiences of grassroots women's organizations in Kenyan communities

I want to look at the topics of women's lives and environmental injustice from a climate change perspective. And I would like to tell a story from the community where I come from, called Akamba, in Kitui County. The community borders another county by the name of Tana River. Since I was born, the two communities have had conflicts, especially from a perspective of herder-farmer conflicts, where the people from Tana River keep animals, especially camels, and the people from Kitui County are crop farmers. It never used to be deadly, but over time, the conflict has become worse because of the effects of climate change.

We have seen people being displaced, especially in the Akamba community, and having to sleep in the forest because they cannot sleep in their homes for fear of being attacked by the people from the Tana River community. When they bring their camels to feed in the forest in Kitui County, they also feed on the farms in Akamba by feeding on their crops. If a member of the community from Akamba tries to prevent the camels from feeding on their food crops in their farms, they would be attacked by the people from the other region. This has resulted in numerous killings all over. In the process, people have



been displaced, especially women. The men would remain behind, taking care of the homes, but the women and the children would be taken to the forest. The argument is that they cannot run quickly when the attackers come to their homes.

In the forest, women fetch firewood and hunt for gums to sell, but they have been raped by the other community. Living in the forest has prevented children from getting access to formal education, and this has led to an increase in teenage pregnancy. So the impact is more on the female gender than the male gender, looking at it from a gender perspective. That is one way in which climate change has affected women in Kenya.

Another one is from a dumpsite in Nairobi called Dandora, the biggest one in East Africa. It was ordered to be closed in 2021 by the Land and Environmental Court in Kenya, because of the harm it is causing to its citizens. But that has not happened. Women are not getting their monthly periods as they used to. Issues of cancer and pregnancy have been reported. And all this is as a result of the environmental impact caused by pollution and the exploitation of industries in our country.

How are women trying to overcome and adapt in this environment that does not serve them? I grew up with my maternal grandmother having a good relationship with the forest and with the mountains. She used to speak to the forest with a group of women, and it used to listen. These women would go on top of the mountains and call out for rain. And it would rain. Why? Because they had a good relationship with the forest, with the rain, with the mountains. They never used to exploit the forest. They preserved it.

There are other innovations that Kenyan women are involved in terms of preserving the environment and environmental justice. Some of you may know Professor Wangari Maathai. She was awarded the Peace Award because of her work in Kenya and globally. She said: "I know there is pain when sawmills close and people lose jobs. But we have to make a choice. We need water, and we need these forests." That's a comment referring to the economic hardships that Kenyans were going through. She was also encouraging some Kenyans that, as much as we need to benefit from these forests and from the environment, we also have a responsibility to take care of the forest. She started the Green Belt Movement, where she brought women from different counties in Kenya. These women started planting trees, promoting environmental conservation. That restoration initiative is still active to date.

Kenyan women are promoting climate and environmental justice. We have seen women right now planting indigenous trees that we grew up eating fruits from. Indigenous trees where we sat under their shade. I remember when I was growing up, we were taking care of animals in the forest, and we never used to come back home to eat lunch because we ate forest berries for lunch. There were fruits. We would just walk around, get fruits in the forest, and that was our lunch. Indigenous trees also provide you with medicine.



When I get a cough, my grandmother would just peel some part of an indigenous tree and make a potion to heal me.

The forest restoration is aiming to get back to where we used to be. The women are also managing water by using different ways of water harvesting. We also have sustainable agriculture, which is being practiced, especially in Kenya, by World March of Women members in Nyandarua County and Muranga County. In Muranga County, we have seen women planting dry roots, arrow roots, which do well in dry areas. We have seen women planting that for their own consumption and then later on adding value and selling to the market.

Finally, we have seen knowledge sharing. Older women are educating their younger women on how to relate well with the forest, land, waters, and nature that is around us. Such dialogues and circles are building a community of women who are preserving the environment.

My closing remarks come from a quote made by a woman in the struggle for environmental justice. Susan Griffin says that “we are the birds’ eggs. Bird’s eggs, flowers, butterflies, rabbits, cows, sheep; we are caterpillars; we are leaves of ivy and sprigs of wallflower. We are women. We rise from the wave. We are gazelle and doe, elephant and whale, lilies and roses, and peach, we are air, we are flame, we are oyster and pearl, we are girls. We are women and nature.” This quote encourages me, and I hope it encourages you to know that we have a relationship with nature, and we need to restore and preserve it so that it can also serve us. The last quote that I came across is from Chief Si’ahl, and it really speaks to me: “The Earth does not belong to us, we belong to the Earth.”

Regina Mutiru is a member of the World March of Women in Kenya. This article is an edited transcript of her presentation at the webinar “Building Proposals for Feminist Economy and Environmental Justice,” organized by Friends of the Earth International, World March of Women, Capire, and Real World Radio on July 15, 2025.

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