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Ecofeminism in the Philippines: Reframing '*Babae Kasi*' and the '*Ate*' Role in Environmental Advocacy

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Introduction

Growing up as a Filipina, I became very familiar with the phrase "*Babae Kasi*." It was a common remark, often said by older relatives, neighbors, and even classmates, sometimes jokingly, sometimes dismissively. When I cried too easily, the response was "*Babae Kasi*." When I hesitated to climb trees or carry heavy buckets of water, it was "*Babae Kasi*." When I insisted on cleaning up after everyone at home or mediating fights among siblings, it was always reduced to that one phrase. At times, it made me feel small, as if being a woman meant being overly emotional, overly cautious, or naturally burdened with others' problems. This phrase was never meant as praise; rather, it functioned as a label, a characterization, even a judgment implying inherent weakness.

But over time, I started to notice something different. These traits that were labeled "too feminine" were also the same ones that kept our household functioning. When our area experienced flooding, it was the women in our family—me, my mother, and my sisters—who organized the drying of clothes, the salvage of food, the sweeping out of mud, and the calming of children. When water was scarce during dry seasons, it was we who found ways to recycle and reuse, to make the most out of what little we had. We were expected to manage these crises quietly, without thanks, because "*Babae Kasi*." But perhaps "*Babae Kasi*" is not just a cultural excuse; it is also a hidden badge of competence and care. I began to see this role as one of quiet leadership. The same sensitivity I was told made me fragile helped me notice when our garden soil was too dry, when our waste segregation was off, or when a neighbor needed help after a storm. I was acting not out of weakness, but out of deep connection, to people, to land, to home.

I realized that my actions, though never recognized as “activism,” were small forms of ecofeminist resistance. I cared for the environment because I was raised to care for siblings, for elders, for the future. And like many other Filipino women, I now see that our so-called limitations can be powerful tools for change. “*Babae Kasi*” is not a reason to doubt us, but a reason we lead differently through empathy, through everyday responsibility, and through a deep sense of stewardship. This redefinition of “*Babae Kasi*” is not just mine. I’ve seen it in rural women who tend gardens that feed entire villages, in mothers who advocate for clean water in the community, and in young girls who speak up during school clean-up drives. We are told we are “just women,” but it is precisely because we are women that we rise to meet environmental challenges, not with force, but with persistence, care, and an unshakable commitment to life.

In the face of environmental degradation, women in the Philippines, particularly Filipino women, have begun to assert their voices in addressing the issue from their own experiences and unique positions. Environmental challenges such as deforestation, climate change, and the exploitation of natural resources often have a disproportionate impact on women, especially in countries like the Philippines, where they are both primary caregivers and contributors to the economy through agricultural and domestic labor (Aragon and Miller 2012). Yet, despite the severe impact of environmental issues, Filipino women have been at the forefront of grassroots movements, spearheading efforts to preserve their communities and the environment. This essay will explore how these women have been shaped by cultural concepts, such as “*Ate*” and “*Babae Kasi*,” and how these ideas have influenced their response to environmental degradation.

The “*Babae Kasi*” in Perspective

The phrase “*Babae Kasi*” is a typical Filipino expression that translates to “It is because she is a woman” or “She is just like that because she is a woman.” This remark often carries a negative connotation, suggesting that women are inherently emotional, irrational, or prone to certain behaviors. It reflects deep-seated gender stereotypes and biases that have been perpetuated over time. In reality, Filipino women are often characterized by their resilience, strength, empathy, and adaptability. They play crucial roles in their families and communities, often balancing multiple responsibilities and contributing significantly to societal well-being. Despite these positive attributes, the phrase “*Babae Kasi*” undermines their capabilities and reinforces gender inequality.

Historically, Filipino society has been patriarchal, with traditional gender roles assigning men as breadwinners and women as caregivers. This societal structure has contributed to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, where women are often viewed as less capable in certain tasks, particularly those traditionally dominated by men. For example, women behind the wheel are frequently subjected to the “*Babae Kasi*” remark, implying that their gender inherently makes them poor at navigating the road (Tan 2017). Such biases undermine women’s confidence and limit their personal and professional growth opportunities.

The persistence of these stereotypes is a global issue, particularly evident in workplaces around the world. Despite advancements in gender equality, women continue to face discrimination and bias in professional settings. They are underrepresented in leadership positions and often earn less than their male counterparts for the same work. Global studies, such as that by Kennedy and Kmec (2018), have shown that women on corporate boards are more likely to prioritize environmental, social, and governance issues. However, barriers to reaching these leadership roles persist across different countries and cultures. While the intensity of these challenges may vary locally, the pattern reflects a widespread problem that transcends national boundaries.

Addressing these biases requires a multifaceted approach. Education plays a crucial role in challenging and changing gender stereotypes. By promoting gender-sensitive education and creating awareness about the contributions and capabilities of women, society can move towards greater gender equality. Legal frameworks, such as the Magna Carta of Women in the Philippines (2009), also play a vital role in safeguarding women's rights and promoting gender equality (Sigue-Bisnar 2022). Additionally, media representation of women should be positive and empowering, challenging traditional stereotypes and showcasing women's achievements and capabilities.

In his article "*Babae Kasi*," Michael L. Tan discusses the pervasive sexism in language and how it shapes societal perceptions of women in the Philippines. Despite the gender-neutral nature of many Filipino terms, derogatory phrases like "*Babae Kasi*" are used to highlight perceived weaknesses in women. In contrast, "*Lalake Kasi*" is used to justify male behavior as normal or expected, similar to the expression "boys will be boys." This double standard reinforces gender stereotypes and contributes to the discrimination of women. Tan (2017) emphasizes the need for gender-inclusive language and highlights the importance of addressing sexism in language through education and awareness.

The "*Babae Kasi*" remarks embody a dominant cultural attitude that perpetuates the notion of women as inherently weaker or more limited by societal expectations, especially in the Philippines. Jan Wall (2015) and Ramirez et al. (2024) emphasize how deeply ingrained patriarchal norms reinforce this perception. These norms manifest through traditional gender roles, victim-blaming attitudes, and systemic barriers that limit women's autonomy and access to justice. Wall sheds light on the socio-legal negligence that makes women vulnerable to marital infidelity and abandonment. Her perspective reveals the complex struggles of Filipino women, shaped by societal norms and cultural factors.

Many face marital problems, such as infidelity and abandonment by husbands, with little societal consequence for the men. Legal and social systems often fail to support these women because of financial constraints, slow processes, and the acceptance of marital infidelity. While providing community support, cultural and religious influences, especially Catholicism and the *barangay* system, can also constrain women's autonomy and economic opportunities. From a Western perspective, Wall's analysis points to the need for a drastic cultural change to empower Filipino women and improve their socioeconomic status by challenging traditional attitudes toward marriage, gender roles, and personal responsibility.

In their article “Analyzing the Reality of Women’s Rights Struggles in the Philippines,” Ramirez et al. (2024) examine the complex challenges faced by Filipino women, highlighting issues such as prostitution, human trafficking, and domestic violence, despite the country being labeled as gender-fair. They criticize the government’s failure to effectively implement laws like the Anti-VAWC Act and the Magna Carta of Women, arguing that true equality will only be achieved by addressing the deep-rooted systemic inequalities and oppression women continue to face. Hence, Ramirez et al. (2024) observe a kind of hypocrisy in government efforts. For them, the reason is obvious since existing legislation, such as the Anti-VAWC Act (2004) and the Magna Carta of Women (2009), does not translate into meaningful change.

This systemic perpetuation of inequality demands not only legislative reform but a cultural shift dismantling patriarchal values and creating actual empowerment for Filipino women. Ramirez et al. reveal systemic problems in society that allow inequality and oppression to continue against the Filipino woman. It sums up the shortcomings of these pieces of legislation (the Anti-VAWC Act and the Magna Carta of Women) since violence, discrimination, and exploitation will continue for women despite having these laws. The hypocrisy of the government is portrayed as claiming to protect women’s rights, but it does not implement the laws. Deeply rooted patriarchal values, including traditional gender roles and victim-blaming cultures, further entrench women’s subjugation (UNDP 2023; UNFPA 2023).

Barriers to justice, such as financial constraints, judicial inefficiency, and distrust in a corrupt system, compound these struggles. Moreover, economic inequities also involve wage discrimination and a dearth of opportunities for women, making them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. According to Ramirez et al., such complex challenges require more systemic reforms and the destruction of patriarchy to build equality in the distribution of justice and the economy.

The patriarchal norms and gender roles that traditionally undermine women’s autonomy in the Philippines, such as expectations of submissiveness, domesticity, and caregiving, can paradoxically become sources of strength and solidarity for Filipino ecofeminists. These gendered expectations, while historically oppressive, have also positioned women in close relationship with nature and resource management, especially in rural and Indigenous communities. For instance, Filipino women in farming and fishing villages often serve as primary managers of household food, water, and energy, giving them intimate knowledge of environmental conditions and ecological changes. This practical engagement enables women to become powerful advocates for sustainability. A concrete example is the work of the Save the Ifugao Terraces Movement (SITMo), where Indigenous women take leadership in preserving ancestral lands and rice terraces threatened by climate change and tourism-related degradation. Despite cultural norms that restrict their political voice, these women mobilize traditional knowledge and community networks to promote ecological conservation and cultural heritage. By reinterpreting their roles not as limitations but as forms of ecological stewardship, Filipino ecofeminists challenge patriarchal systems while drawing on them to cultivate environmental resilience and justice. Thus, what has long served to marginalize women can be transformed into a platform for collective environmental empowerment.

Rooted in the deep cultural connection to the environment, Filipino women have long been active in community-based environmental practices, leveraging their knowledge of sustainable living. As Wall and Ramirez et al. point out, the intersection of gender and ecology offers an opportunity to challenge traditional structures, using ecofeminism as a powerful platform to advocate gender equality and environmental justice.

Furthermore, Filipino women contribute to environmental sustainability through both formal advocacy and informal, culturally rooted leadership, particularly through the traditional role of the “*Ate*” (elder sister). In a previous paper, I have highlighted how caregiving and familial support function as forms of informal environmental leadership, bridging the gap between public and private contributions to sustainability and offering a culturally grounded perspective on gender roles in environmentalism (Molino 2024).

Moreover, Filipino women emerge as both champions and critics in the discourse on environmental stewardship, navigating a complex landscape where traditional roles intersect with evolving eco-feminist perspectives. Contrary to stereotypes of passive environmentalism, Filipino women’s attitudes towards ecological issues reveal a nuanced blend of cultural heritage, socio-economic realities, and the transformative potential of eco-feminist ideology (Molino 2024). The tension between the traditional roles of Filipino women as caretakers and their emerging leadership in environmental activism challenges long-held societal norms.

The environment sector faces critical challenges that intertwine climate change, disasters, and gender inequality, requiring inclusive, adaptive, and equitable approaches. Climate change and disaster risks, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, disproportionately affect marginalized groups, including women, girls, persons with disabilities, and Indigenous peoples. Gender-based violence often increases post-disasters, highlighting the vulnerability of women and girls. Moreover, women are underrepresented in decision-making processes across disaster risk management (DRM) phases, limiting the integration of their needs and capacities.

The lack of gender mainstreaming in policies and programs underscores the necessity for building the capacity of sectoral agencies in gender-responsive planning and budgeting. Key government players, such as the Climate Change Commission (CCC) and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), must address these intersecting issues to ensure sustainable development (Philippine Commission on Women).

Relationship between “*Babae Kasi*” and “*Ate*”

The idea behind “*Babae Kasi*” is closely connected to the role of the “*Ate*.” As the elder sister, an “*Ate*” represents key Filipino values such as compassion, responsibility, and informal leadership within both the family and the wider community. This deeply ingrained sense of responsibility often extends beyond the family, leading many Filipino women to view protecting the environment as crucial to their community’s well-

being and future. This connection between care and environmental responsibility is often seen as a natural extension of the “*Ate*” role, and it has propelled Filipino women into the fight for environmental preservation, often with little recognition or support.

My own experience as an “*Ate*” has shaped my understanding of these concepts. The caring and nurturing influence of my role as an older sister has deeply informed my understanding of a woman. It has taught me the importance of responsibility, leadership, and compassion, not just within my family but also in the broader community and the environment. This understanding has been further reinforced by the experiences of my grandmother, a hardworking farmer who embodied the concept of “*Ate*” in her dedication to both her family and the land that sustained them. She would spend hours planting, nurturing, and harvesting, teaching me that the earth was both a provider and something to be cared for in return. Her life was a testament to the interconnectedness of care and environmental responsibility, a lesson that has stayed with me throughout my life.

The power of “*Ate*” and “*Babae Kasi*” is particularly evident in the lives of Filipino women in farming and fishing communities, especially in the Cordillera region and along the shores. These women, often working in close connection with the land and sea, have a deep understanding of the delicate balance of ecosystems and the importance of sustainable practices. They are not only caregivers for their families but also stewards of the environment, ensuring that their communities have access to clean water, fresh food, and a healthy ecosystem.

In the Cordillera region, for example, women farmers play a crucial role in preserving traditional agricultural practices and promoting sustainable farming methods. They are often responsible for planting, nurturing, and harvesting crops, as well as managing the land and water resources. Their knowledge of traditional farming techniques, passed down through generations, is essential for maintaining biodiversity and ensuring food security. These women are also active in advocating for the protection of forests and watersheds, recognizing the importance of these ecosystems for the health of their communities and the environment.

Along the shores, Filipino women fishers are equally important stewards of the environment. They have a deep understanding of the ocean’s rhythms and the importance of sustainable fishing practices. They are often responsible for managing fishing gear, ensuring that it is used responsibly and does not harm marine life. They are also active in advocating for the protection of coastal ecosystems and marine biodiversity, recognizing the importance of these ecosystems for the livelihoods of their communities and the health of the ocean.

These women, whether they are farmers, fishers, or simply community members, embody the strength and resilience of “*Babae Kasi*” as they navigate the challenges of environmental degradation. They are often the first to experience the impacts of climate change, pollution, and resource depletion, but they are also the first to rise up and demand change. Their voices are powerful, and their actions are inspiring, as they work tirelessly to protect their communities and the environment. They are defying the expectations of a subordinate role and proving their power and agency as catalysts of change.

Additionally, the concept of “*Babae Kasi*” is a powerful reminder of the specific challenges that Filipino women face due to environmental issues. In my own life, I have observed how women are often expected to bear the physical and emotional burdens of ecological crises, yet their voices are seldom heard in decision-making processes. “*Babae Kasi*” is both a recognition of women’s struggles and an acknowledgment of their strength and resilience. Women’s unique experiences with environmental degradation are often what drive them to push for solutions that are both practical and sustainable.

As an “*Ate*,” or eldest sibling, I can relate to the intersection of gender equality and environmental goals, as both aspects are intertwined in my everyday experience. The traditional Filipino concept of “*Babae Kasi*” highlights qualities often ascribed to women, such as caregiving, responsibility, and leadership within the family. These characteristics, while sometimes limiting in a patriarchal context, can also empower Filipino women like me in addressing environmental challenges. The principle that environmental degradation affects men and women differently resonates with me, particularly as I witness how women in my community bear the brunt of environmental stressors, like collecting water and managing household resources.

Just as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and United Nations Sustainable Development Goals recognize, women’s roles in resource management are critical, yet they are often overlooked in discussions about environmental sustainability. As an “*Ate*,” I take responsibility not only for my family’s well-being but also for our home’s sustainability. For instance, I ensure water conservation by reminding my siblings to turn off the faucet while brushing their teeth and reusing laundry rinse water for cleaning. In waste management, I promote segregation by setting up separate bins for recyclables and biodegradables, teaching my younger siblings how to properly dispose of items. I also lead efforts to reduce single-use plastics by encouraging reusable containers for packed lunches. Through these practices, I cultivate environmental responsibility at home while setting a positive example for my family. This practice is in line with findings that women, particularly in developing countries, are more likely to adopt eco-friendly practices and support policies that promote sustainability (OECD 2021; UNDP and University of Oxford 2021).

As an “*Ate*,” I navigate responsibilities that extend beyond familial care into environmental stewardship, reinforcing the expectation that women naturally take on nurturing roles—often summed up by the phrase “*Babae Kasi*.” While this phrase can reflect traditional gender roles that assume women should manage household affairs, it also presents an opportunity for empowerment. My role as “*Ate*” allows me to lead by example, integrating sustainability into daily life, such as ensuring water conservation, promoting waste segregation, and minimizing single-use plastics. These efforts may seem small within the household, but they contribute to broader environmental goals when practiced consistently and shared with others. At the same time, societal norms that frame caregiving as a female duty can limit perceptions of who should advocate for sustainability, reinforcing expectations that environmental action is a personal responsibility rather than a collective one. However, by embracing my role as an “*Ate*” and challenging the passive connotation of “*Babae Kasi*,” I transform these gendered

expectations into leadership. Through education and advocacy, I bridge the gap between household responsibility and community action, demonstrating that environmental sustainability is not just a woman's burden, but an opportunity for all to contribute to a healthier planet.

“Babae Kasi” as Women Environmental Defenders in Peril

Over the last two decades, “environmental defenders” have gained traction globally, supported by an expanding international framework of recognition, resources, and advocacy (Verweijen et al. 2021). However, Verweijen et al. have critiqued how the term's uneven adoption and varied connotations can empower or disempower those it seeks to represent, particularly when it misaligns with how these individuals perceive themselves and their work.

Environmental defenders suffer from various kinds of violence—physical, structural, cultural, and ecological—that lead to general insecurity and precarity. Despite the “climate of fear” and its intense psychological effects, the defenders keep fighting for their lands and waters, which signifies the importance of protecting life and ecosystems rather than survival as individuals (Menton et al. 2021).

Despite growing media and policy attention on environmental defenders, systematic analysis of the repression patterns and drivers remains limited. Verweijen et al. (2021) highlight that socio-environmental conflicts often involve arrests, violence, and killings, with high fatality rates, particularly in resource-dependent nations with weak governance, large Indigenous populations, or significant foreign investment, like Brazil, the Philippines, and Colombia.

In their examination of the gendered violence faced by land and environmental defenders in Ecuador, Venegas and van Teijlingen (2021) have emphasized how extractive activities feminize territories by targeting women disproportionately. Highlighting the collective actions of *Mujeres Amazónicas* (Amazonian Women), they critique the individualization of struggles and advocate for collectivized resistance, drawing on critical feminist geography and long-term fieldwork.

Violence, Red-Tagging, and Systemic Challenges in the Philippines

The Philippines is one of the most dangerous countries in Asia for environmental defenders, with 17 murders and enforced disappearances documented in 2023 alone (Rappler 2024; Conde 2024). The country ranks fifth globally in such killings, surpassed only by Colombia, Brazil, Mexico, and Honduras. Many victims are Indigenous leaders and women defenders resisting extractive industries like mining, logging, and agribusiness, which have detrimental social and environmental impacts. For example, grassroots resistance on Sibuyan Island against nickel mining was violently repressed. The Indigenous Peoples are the most affected, as they make up more than

one-third of those killed because of their leadership roles in defending ancestral lands. Women defenders comprise 11 percent of those killed, pointing to the nexus of gender-based violence and environmental activism (Rappler 2024; Conde 2024).

It further heightens the structural issues in government support for mining as an economic driver. Red-tagging and enforced disappearance or murder often become part of protest movements. Systematic harassment by authorities and armed forces has created a culture of impunity that sees continuous threats and intimidation without recourse against defenders.

Red tagging is a term that often precedes physical violence and reflects how environmental activism is criminalized rather than protected in the Philippines. Such persistent attacks highlight a need for much-needed systemic reforms focusing on accountability to protect environmental advocates, especially from poor communities (Rappler 2024; Conde 2024).

Filipino women as environmental defenders face unique gender-based threats, and marginalized women, predominantly Indigenous and rural women, are particularly vulnerable due to the impacts of extractive industries like mining and logging, which exacerbate violence and limit their agency (Dumalag 2021). Gendered factors, such as heightened exposure to violence, conflicts, and limited opportunities for mobilization, shape these dynamics. Addressing these issues requires recognizing the intersection of gender and environmental advocacy challenges, where gendered vulnerabilities must be central to discussions on environmental justice and protection (Tran 2023).

The Philippines' rich biodiversity and extensive natural resources have attracted numerous extractive industries, often leading to environmental degradation that disproportionately affects Indigenous communities. Indigenous women, such as those from the Cordillera region and Mindanao, have risen to prominence as defenders of their ancestral lands. Their roles are not only rooted in cultural traditions that position women as custodians of the Earth but also stem from a recognition of the direct impact environmental destruction has on their livelihoods and familial responsibilities (Abano 2019).

Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, an Igorot activist from the Cordillera region, exemplifies Indigenous ecofeminist leadership. As the former United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, she has campaigned against large-scale mining and logging operations that threaten Indigenous territories. Tauli-Corpuz emphasizes that the struggle for environmental justice is inherently linked to the fight for Indigenous women's rights, as both involve challenging systemic inequalities (Rights and Resources Initiative 2015).

In Mindanao, Indigenous Lumad women have organized against mining companies encroaching on their lands. Their activism highlights the intersections of environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and gender equality. The United Nations (2023) emphasizes that women face multiple layers of oppression, including militarization, displacement, and gender-based violence, yet they continue to assert their rights and protect their environment.

The activism of these women is rooted in a deep spiritual connection to the land, viewing nature as a living entity rather than a resource to be exploited. This perspective challenges Western notions of development and calls for a more sustainable and equitable approach to resource management (Mensah 2019). By asserting their roles as environmental stewards, Indigenous Filipino women are redefining leadership and societal roles imposed by patriarchal norms.

Their stories underscore the importance of integrating Indigenous knowledge and gender perspectives into environmental policies. The confluence of ecofeminism in their activism not only confronts environmental degradation but also dismantles societal structures that marginalize women and Indigenous Peoples. As such, their efforts contribute significantly to global dialogues on sustainability, human rights, and gender equality.

The Indigenous women environmental defenders of the Philippines embody the principles of ecofeminism through their unwavering commitment to protecting their land and their rights. Their struggles and victories offer critical insights into how ecofeminist approaches can address complex issues arising from the intertwined oppressions of gender and environmental exploitation.

Women as Environmental Guardians

Several scholarly articles have documented various works that advance women's critical awareness and active actions toward environmental care and sustainability (Sinha 2023; Mathur et al. 2023; Khan 2024). These works highlight the significant contributions of women in promoting environmental stewardship and addressing climate change. For instance, women's leadership in environmental decision-making has been linked to more ambitious climate goals and policies (Wray et al. 2023). Women on corporate boards consistently prioritize environmental, social, and governance issues, including climate and sustainability. Also, according to Smith (2022), women worldwide are creating robust networks to combat environmental degradation and tackle climate-related inequalities in civil society.

Women's participation in environmental sustainability efforts is crucial, especially in Indigenous and rural communities where they often manage natural resources and maintain ecological balance (Arora-Jonsson 2011; Agarwal 2010). Their knowledge, experience, and leadership are critical in advancing environmental sustainability efforts on a global scale. Women like Wangari Maathai, the founder of the Green Belt Movement, have inspired millions to take up environmental causes and work toward a more sustainable and equitable world (MAPFou 2024).

Aragon and Miller (2012) emphasize the indispensable role of women in the sustainable management of natural resources, while also highlighting their disproportionate vulnerability to the impacts of environmental degradation. This dual positioning underscores the necessity of incorporating gender perspectives into environmental policy and practice. The chapter highlights various movements and initiatives led by women globally, such as the UN Earth Summit, India's Chipko movement, and

Kenya's Green Belt Movement. For example, the Chipko movement saw Indian women embracing trees to prevent them from being cut down. At the same time, the Green Belt Movement, founded by Wangari Maathai, involved Kenyan women in tree planting to combat deforestation and desertification (McFarlin 2023).

The article "Empowering Women, Protecting the Earth" by UN Women emphasizes the disproportionate impact of the climate crisis on women and girls and how empowering women can lead to better environmental outcomes. It includes stories of women leading sustainability efforts globally. One notable example is the work of women in the Pacific Islands who are actively involved in climate adaptation projects, such as building sea walls and developing sustainable agriculture practices to cope with rising sea levels (UN Women 2023).

Anupma Sinha's paper "Women's Role in Environmental Sustainability: Empowerment, Participation, and Impact" (2012) explores the connections between women and the environment, highlighting the importance of women's empowerment and participation in fostering environmental sustainability. It discusses the barriers women face and their transformative potential in promoting ecological balance and climate resilience. For instance, in rural Nepal, women have formed cooperatives to manage community forests, which has led to improved forest conservation and increased incomes for their families (Sinha 2012).

Mukherjee (2013) argues that women have a unique and vital role in environmental governance and management, but their disempowerment in other social domains is also reflected in environmental governance. She emphasizes that ecofeminism, which links the domination of women to the destruction of the environment, highlights the importance of women's participation in promoting sustainable development. An example is the Barefoot College in India, which trains women, often grandmothers, to become solar engineers, enabling them to bring sustainable energy solutions to their communities (Mukherjee 2013).

Dar and Syed (2019) argue that women, as prime caretakers of families, are at the forefront of the environmental crisis due to their significant role in environmentally related consumption. They emphasize that ecofeminism, a branch of feminist theory, can be applied to understand the connection between women and the natural environment, highlighting women's crucial contributions to environmental conservation. For example, women in Bangladesh have been instrumental in adopting and promoting floating gardens, a sustainable farming technique that mitigates the impacts of flooding (Dar and Syed 2019).

The study conducted by Elaine A. Logronio (2021) examines how ecofeminism is portrayed in Alice Tan-Gonzales' Palanca-winning short stories, notably "*Sa taguang-kan sang duta kag iban pa nga sugilanon.*" It emphasizes the profound connection between women and nature through spiritual and cultural ecofeminism within Western Visayan society. Logronio (2021) argues that Tan-Gonzales' narratives vividly depict this bond, showcasing ecofeminist themes through characters and settings that highlight ongoing challenges faced by women. These stories illuminate the struggles and experiences of female characters, urging greater awareness and action to address these societal issues.

In my article “Ecofeminist Perspectives and Familial Dynamics: Exploring Women’s Roles in Environmental Sustainability and the Filipino Concept of ‘*Ate*,’” (Molino 2024), I argue that women’s roles in environmental sustainability are deeply interconnected with their familial roles, mainly through the Filipino concept of “*Ate*” (elder sister). I emphasize that women, especially first-born females, often take on leadership, teaching, and caregiving roles from a young age, which positions them as significant local and global environmental stewards. For example, first-born females in Filipino families often lead community initiatives such as clean-up drives and tree-planting activities, reinforcing their role as environmental caretakers.

This argument correlate with other authors like Ho’s (2016) concept of “ecofamilism,” which emphasizes the interconnectedness of family, community, and the environment. And also, Logronio’s (2021) study on Alice Tan-Gonzales’ short stories, as both works highlight the interconnectedness of women’s roles in environmental advocacy and caregiving. While Ho mirrors the Taiwanese ecofamilist groups’ emphasis on nurturing and caring for the extended ecological family, and Logronio focuses on literary depictions of ecofeminism, my essay provides a broader cultural and familial context, showing how these roles are embedded in Filipino culture and contribute to environmental sustainability.

The interwoven relationship between women and the environment is evident globally across diverse cultures and initiatives. Women’s unique roles and experiences position them as crucial stewards of natural resources and effective leaders in environmental conservation. From grassroots movements like India’s Chipko movement and Kenya’s Green Belt Movement to academic explorations of ecofeminism and practical community efforts in the Pacific Islands and rural Nepal, women have consistently demonstrated their profound impact on environmental sustainability. Despite significant barriers, their empowerment and participation are essential in fostering ecological conscience, balance, and resilience (Le Duc 2023). The studies and examples discussed above underscore the transformative potential of women in driving sustainable development and protecting our planet for future generations. Their contributions highlight the need for continued support, recognition, and inclusion of women in all environmental governance and management aspects.

Despite these contributions, women often face barriers to full participation in decision-making. Gender inequality, lack of access to resources, and limited representation in leadership roles hinder women’s ability to effect change. Addressing these gender disparities ensures that women can fully participate in environmental governance and sustainable development initiatives (Smith 2022).

Undeniably, the documented works on women emphasize the importance of women’s critical awareness and active actions in promoting environmental care and sustainability. These efforts are vital for achieving global sustainability and environmental justice.

Filipino Ecofeminism—Connecting Gender Equality and Environmental Justice

Ecofeminism is a philosophical and activist movement that connects the exploitation of women with that of nature. The movement argues that the oppression of both women and nature at various points in history has been well entrenched, while societies under patriarchal rule treat both as resources to control. It advocates for gender equality and environmental justice based on the whole approach of life and nature and emphasizes systems that recognize the interconnectedness of gender, ecology, and social justice. This perspective critiques capitalist structures prioritizing profit over the well-being of the environment and women and calls for an alternative worldview that values sustainable relationships with nature and gender equity (Britannica 2020; Buckingham 2015).

However, while Western ecofeminist scholarship often emphasizes the inherent link between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature, Wan-Li Ho's (2016, 13) study of Taiwanese women environmental activists offers a valuable counterpoint. Ho argues that Western ecofeminist models, rooted in Western philosophical and cultural contexts, don't always resonate with East Asian experiences. She proposes "ecofamilism" as a more appropriate framework, highlighting the unique ways Taiwanese women integrate environmental concerns with family and community well-being.

This Taiwanese perspective proposed by Ho provides a crucial lens for examining the complexities of Filipino ecofeminism, particularly in its emphasis on women. While the specific manifestations differ due to cultural and historical contexts, both ecofeminism in the Philippines and Ho's ecofamilism demonstrate the powerful interconnectedness of gender, ecology, and social justice in the pursuit of environmental sustainability and gender equity.

Ecofeminism in this sense is highly applicable in the Philippines due to the intersection of gender, culture, and environmental interests. The country has many cultural differences, with Indigenous peoples closer to natural resources and ecosystems. Through this prism, the unique vulnerabilities of women in rural and Indigenous communities have been analyzed, who suffer disproportionately more from environmental degradation. These women, primarily custodians of the land, are therefore at the very forefront of balancing the ecological well-being, but they also belong to one of the most excluded groups in society (Mathur 2023; Schmonsky 2025).

Ecofeminism in the Philippines advances holistic environmental justice by integrating gender equality and ecological sustainability. Like most other developing nations, the Philippines is under tremendous pressure regarding its environmental concerns, such as deforestation, climate change, and pollution. Ecofeminism advocates for a sustainable development model wherein women's rights and well-being are promoted while participation in decision-making regarding natural resource management and policy development increases—the advocacy centers on gender empowerment and protecting natural resources (Allison 2017).

“Babae Kasi” as a Positive Ecofeminism

“Babae Kasi” is frequently used to highlight traits or roles that are traditionally attributed to women. However, there is a growing movement to reframe this term to highlight Filipino women’s positive attributes and strengths, particularly in environmental advocacy and other significant contributions. With their nurturing qualities and community-oriented perspectives, women are indispensable in driving ecological sustainability and protecting the environment. Filipino women, often called *“Babae Kasi,”* have emerged as formidable environmental defenders, leveraging their innate nurturing qualities and community-oriented perspectives to champion ecological sustainability. Their deep connection to the land and cultural heritage uniquely positions them to address environmental challenges, as they embody resilience, adaptability, and commitment to future generations. This scholarly perspective is supported by the work of Datar, who emphasizes the pivotal role of Indigenous Filipino women in biodiversity conservation through traditional ecological knowledge (Datar 2003, 63).

The participation of Filipino women in environmental protection and sustainability efforts is deeply rooted in cultural, social, and historical contexts that shape their attitudes and actions. Their unique perspectives and strengths contribute significantly to these global challenges. The label *“Babae Kasi,”* referring to the Filipino women, needs to shift its meaning to a more positive perspective. Filipino women, I believe, have a deep-rooted connection to the environment.

Filipino women’s connection to the environment is often anchored in Indigenous and rural traditions where the natural world is integral to daily life. This relationship fosters a sense of stewardship and responsibility toward nature. According to Datar (2003), Indigenous Filipino women embody traditional ecological knowledge pivotal in biodiversity conservation.

For instance, Kristel Quierrez, an outspoken environmentalist and Agta youth leader from Quezon province, was named one of the 2025 Restoration Stewards by the Global Landscapes Forum (GLF), highlighting the critical role of women and their innate care for nature (Santos 2025). As the only Filipino among seven awardees recognized for ecosystem restoration, Quierrez’s dedication underscores the importance of women’s involvement in environmental conservation. Her work in mountain restoration blends education, advocacy, and cultural pride, inspiring future generations and emphasizing the vital need for women’s leadership in sustaining our planet’s health. With their nurturing qualities and community-oriented perspectives, women are indispensable in driving ecological sustainability and protecting the environment.

Summary and Conclusion

In the Philippines, I frequently heard the phrase *“Babae Kasi,”* initially interpreting it as a dismissal of women’s capabilities. However, I eventually reinterpreted this phrase, arguing that the traits associated with it, emotional sensitivity, caregiving, and a focus on community, were precisely the qualities that enabled women to effectively address

environmental challenges. This perspective was rooted in my observations of women in Filipino society, particularly in rural and Indigenous communities where women often acted as primary caregivers and resource managers, possessing intimate knowledge of local ecosystems.

The concept of "*Ate*," the elder sister, embodied Filipino values of compassion, responsibility, and informal leadership. I connected this role to environmental stewardship, showing how women's traditional caregiving roles naturally extended to environmental protection. I provided examples of women in farming and fishing communities who exhibited deep ecological knowledge and sustainable practices.

I also highlighted the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation on women and the challenges they faced in decision-making processes. I discussed the violence and threats faced by Filipino women environmental defenders, particularly Indigenous and rural women, who were often targeted for their activism. I cited various sources to illustrate the dangers faced by these women, including red-tagging and extrajudicial killings.

I explored the concept of ecofeminism, linking the oppression of women to the exploitation of nature. I argued that ecofeminism offered a valuable framework for understanding the interconnectedness of gender inequality and environmental degradation in the Philippines. I highlighted the contributions of Indigenous Filipino women in biodiversity conservation and their unique perspectives on resource management. Finally, I proposed a positive reinterpretation of "*Babae Kasi*," emphasizing the strengths and resilience of Filipino women in environmental advocacy. I concluded by emphasizing the importance of acknowledging women's unique experiences and contributions to environmental sustainability, both within the family and in broader society.

My essay presented a strong argument for the importance of integrating gender perspectives into environmental discussions and activism. By connecting personal experiences with cultural concepts and academic theories, I demonstrated how seemingly negative cultural stereotypes could be reframed as sources of strength and agency. One of the key goals of the essay was to bridge the gap between personal narratives, cultural context, and academic discourse on ecofeminism. It highlighted the crucial role of Filipino women in environmental sustainability and called for greater recognition of their contributions and the challenges they faced in their activism. I also argued that a more nuanced understanding of gender roles and cultural values was essential for effective environmental advocacy and the achievement of environmental justice in the Philippines. A central point of my thesis was the reinterpretation of "*Babae Kasi*" as a phrase often used to express gender-based limitations, as a powerful symbol of Filipino women's resilience and leadership in environmental protection. This reimagining underscores the need for a shift in perspective to fully value and support the vital role of women in building a sustainable future. My own experiences and observations as a Filipino woman and elder sister in the family have profoundly shaped my understanding of this complex issue, and I believe that by embracing our cultural strengths and challenging harmful stereotypes, we could create a more just and sustainable future for all.

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