

Community Environmental Management and the Role of Women: Case Study of Laguna De Tres Palos and the Coastal Community of El Arenal, Gro., México

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Abstract

Of this research was to examine community ecological management from the perspective of women's roles, reflecting on new ways of understanding socio-environmental problems in the Tres Palos lagoon and the Arenal community. A phenomenological approach was adopted, considering the processes of noema and noesis and the construction of spaces for dialogue and participation for women in the community. Twenty women who have lived in El Arenal for decades and interacted with the Tres Palos ecosystem were included. Underscore the need to give women a voice in the process of environmental conservation and to document their experiences as a conceptual basis for decision-making, as a starting point toward gender-equitable governance. These decisions, framed within environmental political management with an ecofeminist vision, spotlight the integrative, binding, and influential role of women. This research adopts a political approach to constructing ideas for addressing socio-environmental problems in strategic ecosystems. This research provides new insights into community-based environmental management and its relationship with local ecofeminism, highlighting interaction with community knowledge as a key strategy for addressing and mitigating human-caused ecological problems.

Keywords: *Coastal Communities, Ecosystem Conservation, Ecofeminism, Environmental Phenomenology, Women's Role.*

Introduction

Community environmental management, by strengthening and empowering communities, becomes a fundamental tool for addressing current socio-environmental problems (Godden et al. 2020). Specifically, to counteract the effects of development models dominated by male interests that have led to environmental degradation. In this context, the role of women is essential to provide a complementary gender perspective and build a more balanced *visión* (Haraway 2015).

This study, focusing on women in the community of El Arenal, in the state of Guerrero, Mexico, explores how environmental management can emerge from a feminine perspective, exemplified by them as housewives, fishermen, and agents of change. By adopting an ecofeminist approach, this research differentiates itself from that of Casarrubias-Jáimez et al. (2021) and Juárez Islas et al. (2023). Due to its epistemological approach from an ecofeminist perspective and its interconnection between environmental challenges and social inequalities, the women of the El Arenal community demonstrate, through their local practices and knowledge, how community environmental management can be a process of empowerment and social transformation.

However, it is important to recognize that the pollution of the Tres Palos lagoon affects multiple communities and that women's response is part of a network of relationships and reciprocity with nature and other communities. This is due to the emerging capacity of ecofeminist discourses, which provide a theoretical framework that makes these connections visible and strengthens collective action for ecosystem protection.

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On the other hand, it is a way of deconstructing the interpretation of environmental problems, providing a social reading and that of people excluded by economic, political, academic and power rhetoric that displaces the possibility of reflecting on the problem from a socio-environmental perspective, from emerging and alternative perspectives to the hegemonic and masculine, such as ecofeminism and its relationship with community environmental management.

Thus, the objective of this research was to examine community environmental management from the perspective of women's roles, in order to reflect on alternative ways of understanding socio-environmental problems in the Tres Palos lagoon and the community of El Arenal, Acapulco, as a case study.

Theoretical Analysis

The perspective of current feminisms is considered to interpret possible results and frame them within a theoretical analysis of the development of this document. In this regard, several approaches have been established and examined. However, the author Haraway (1999;1995) proposes to explore the intersections that feminism offers, within a broad, rich and diverse panorama on how to theoretically interpret these conceptualizations, such as ecofeminism.

It is emphasized that, from environmental justice and ecofeminisms, key intersectionalities are offered to understand oppression, power and environmental relationships or with natural resources, which women have had to overcome throughout history. This implies that communities, through female voices, strengthen ties with nature without being marginalized, distancing themselves from the power structures that have oppressed and generating alternative mechanisms of resistance (Sulistiani & Indriyany, 2024).

From this perspective, Sutton (2007), argues that the act of caring and being cared for within a relationship between the individual and nature constitutes a political and ethical practice. These practices are associated with the generational care of biodiversity, the environment, and families. In this sense, Haraway (1999) invites us to immerse ourselves in a discourse that highlights the intentionality of women and their relationship with nature, oriented toward its preservation.

From another perspective, Orrego Torres (2025) and de Carvalho (2026) argue that ecofeminisms are linked to resistance against the exploitation of natural resources and the oppression of women. The relationship between the feminine and the natural is broken by male hegemony and political discourses that affect the role of women in society and in their interaction with the environment, marginalizing said role. According with ecofeminism is considered an epistemological construction that leads us to understand that nature is interconnected with the actions of resistance that women have developed over time through agriculture, fishing, community life, and the transmission of traditions and knowledge.

On the other hand, Álzate Perea & Avilés (2026), argue that the relationship between women and nature has been objectified by structures of domination that, throughout history, have marginalized the social role of women. However, modernity has laid the groundwork for this objectification to evolve into an epistemological category that allows women to excel and separate themselves from power structures. This favors the empowerment of women, allowing them to interact meaningfully with political, economic, natural systems, and barriers historically imposed by the West.

Other researchers Scharff (2024), have revealed that women's experiences of connection and integrity with nature have strengthened conservation, reducing barriers of inequality and constituting a form of resistance to the hegemonic discourses of the neoliberal model and patriarchy. This means that integrating themselves into the natural environment and conceiving it not only as a refuge but as a means of sustenance has allowed women to separate themselves and free themselves from the hegemonic social structures imposed to dominate and exercise power.

These experiences also relate to the idea of living in care and harmony with natural resources (Harris, 2022); which reflects the need to maintain a perspective that makes visible the problems associated, for decades, with the exclusion of the female role in the fight for an equitable, organized society with evenly distributed

natural resources. The ecofeminisms emerge as a response to the globalized economic and market model, which has imposed restrictions on women. These limitations are not exclusive to this century, but have been present in previous centuries.

Methodology

Type of study: This research adopts a qualitative and phenomenological approach to understand the crucial role of women in participatory environmental management in the community of El Arenal and their relationship with the Tres Palos Lagoon. The study focuses on the lived experiences and perspectives of women who interact with this lagoon ecosystem, exploring how they have contributed to the construction of environmental management practices based on their knowledge and experiences (Figure 1).

Area of study: The community of El Arenal is home to 520 fishermen, 200 of whom are women who maintain constant interaction with the lagoon (INEGI, 2020). Fishing, the community's economic engine, is established as the main source of livelihood for its inhabitants. The problem stemmed from the lack of sufficiently robust conservation strategies in Laguna de Tres Palos, both internally (within the community) and externally (through government and other power institutions). The need to integrate local knowledge and women's perspectives was evident as key elements for understanding the problem and formulating concrete and effective actions.

Immersion phase: A two-month field immersion program was conducted to understand the community's needs and establish close ties with its residents, especially the women. This immersion phase, essential for reaching out to local stakeholders, was carried out through various activities that enabled:

- **To understand women's experiences in relation to the Laguna de Tres Palos and community life:** The aim was to understand how social life is structured in a community that depends on fishing, and how women, challenging traditional roles, are inserted into this activity.
- **Conduct field trips to recognize the territory:** Over several weeks, tours were conducted around the study area, encouraging the women to identify and report the socio-environmental problems they perceived in their surroundings. This shared experience facilitated interaction between the participants and the research team, which fostered an organic observation of the territory.

The constant presence of researchers in the community, combined with the women's participation in the tours, helped to generate a climate of trust and mutual recognition, essential elements for the development of the research.

Information gathering phase: It was carried out during two months of fieldwork, a period in which a group of female participants from the community was established in order to invite them to be part of the research focus group.

The focus group: It was made up of 20 women with different roles within the community: housewives, domestic workers, farmers, fishermen, merchants, and teachers. Their participation was fundamental to building the empirical basis for the research.

Open dialogue: with the 20 participants, providing them with a space to share their experiences at the Tres Palos lagoon and their perspectives on community life in El Arenal. This opportunity for dialogue also allowed them to deepen their local knowledge and understand their thinking regarding the ecosystem and the importance of its care.

Analysis of the information: The process of analyzing the information collected in the dialogues with the focus group was structured in the following stages:

1. **Transcription of the dialogues:** The conversations held with the participants were fully transcribed.

2. Analysis and interpretation of transcribed information: A qualitative approach was used, using inductive categories and open codes to identify recurring patterns and themes in the women's speeches.

3. Definition of analysis categories: Based on the emerging codes, three main analysis categories were defined:

- Living in a community whose livelihood depends closely on the lagoon.
- The political perspective of women.
- The role of women in building community environmental management.

These categories served as a framework for interpreting the data and organizing the research results.



Figure 1. Methodological outline.

Source: prepared by the authors.

Results

The results are presented through the categories of analysis and the role of women in community environmental management.

The Approach To The Group Of Women

The outreach to the women of the El Arenal community, based on respect and assertive communication, proved fruitful. Over the course of two months, strong relationships were established and a deeper understanding of the Tres Palos lagoon pollution problem was deepened from their perspective.

The women, closely linked to fishing, agriculture, and environmental stewardship, expressed concern about the lagoon, highlighting public insensitivity and a lack of appreciation for the ecosystem services provided by this body of water. They identified pollution from commercial and domestic discharges, mangrove deforestation, and land-use changes as the main factors affecting their community. This finding is related to what other authors have suggested, who propose rethinking care in its various dimensions, including the environmental (Muxí Martínez & Montaner Martorell, 2023).

This immersion allowed us to identify patterns of behavior and build bridges of dialogue between women, community leaders, other communities, and institutions. This gave us a broad view of the problem, fostering the search for joint solutions. Three key axes of research were identified. First, the profound impact of living in a community whose livelihood depends closely on the lagoon was highlighted. Second, the crucial role women play in generally male-dominated activities such as fishing and agriculture was explored, as well as how they have managed to adapt and contribute to these jobs. Finally, a unique political perspective was revealed, in which women identify problems and inequalities that are not immediately apparent. These patterns and behaviors were present in the research. Caucali Gomez & Nocua Chavarro, (2024) and, Muñoz-Zapata & Osorio-Franco (2024), where they explained how women played a decisive and specific role in the construction of a political exercise that was traditionally led by men.

Intentional experience of women (noema): in several studies Campos (2020) and Mosquera, (2022). This paper discusses women's historical experience resisting oppression and how this has been linked to the diverse forms of interrelationship with natural resources and the land. From this perspective, it is important to examine women's intentionality in defending the environment as a response to a hegemonic model of control. Thus, this led to an approach to our research based on the experience of the women of the El Arenal community, who are deeply intertwined with the body of water. The water acquires a meaning constructed over time through the stories they themselves have woven through their interaction with the lagoon, fishing, and agriculture. This is complemented by their vision of the lagoon, for them an experience that transcends the everyday, as they perceive it as a vital process in their daily lives and in their community relationships. This connection opens the way to reflect on community environmental management as a mechanism that reinforces this connection between women, their identity, and nature. The lagoon is not only seen as a means of subsistence, but also as an element valued for its symbolic value, a home that represents a way of life and a space they claim as their own.

This experience reflected the connection that women maintain with an ecosystem affected by the effects of globalization that has permeated localities and communities. They face significant challenges in conserving the lagoon. Their role as fishers is not limited to the extraction of resources, but is a form of conservation, as their daily and direct observation of the lagoon/territory has allowed them to identify significant changes over time, as conceived in the study (Hernández, 2022). The participants noted the disappearance of economically and environmentally valuable fish species, the absence of birds that used to visit the lagoon, and the transformation of the area due to the loss of mangrove cover and the development of residential areas. These observations, built over years, are acts of testimony and experience that allow for a deep understanding of the environmental impact and the urgent need for conservation.

The Role of Women

Reflecting on community environmental management allows for new scenarios for addressing socio-environmental problems. This meditation was also done by Singer (2020) from a pragmatic position of communication based on the visualization of women in society. Meanwhile, from a decolonial perspective Jabeen (2019) reflects on the various feminist positions from the “non-Western” perspective, breaking the structure in which this epistemological body has been read. However, we approach the studies of Pandey (2010) and Adams (2023) by finding intersections between the conservation of natural resources, organic ways of working collectively, and the phenomenological vision of understanding the role of women in a scenario of environmental crisis and globalization, which allows us to tell a story from diverse geographical latitudes, under a similar epistemological panorama.

Under this vision, women have a fundamental role, based on decision-making and community work to solve environmental problems. They also developed strategic scenarios to address the socio-environmental impacts caused by the El Arenal community on the Tres Palos lagoon. The role of each of the women, who worked to identify aspects of community environmental management, fostered social cohesion and short-, medium-, and long-term strategies, striving toward local development based on people's knowledge (Figure 2). This research classified women's roles according to their participation in debates, dialogues, and conversations based on experience.

- ✓ Women leaders: were those who contributed their voice to other women's involvement in the process.
- ✓ Women with management skills: These were the participants who helped connect with other stakeholders: secondary schools, primary schools, and other leaders.
- ✓ Women with decision-making capacity: were those who proposed designing strategies for addressing a community environmental management problem.
- ✓ Women guides: those who contributed to connecting men and fishermen.
- ✓ Women driving change: those who proposed strategies and also sought to create spaces for dialogue, including children and adolescents.

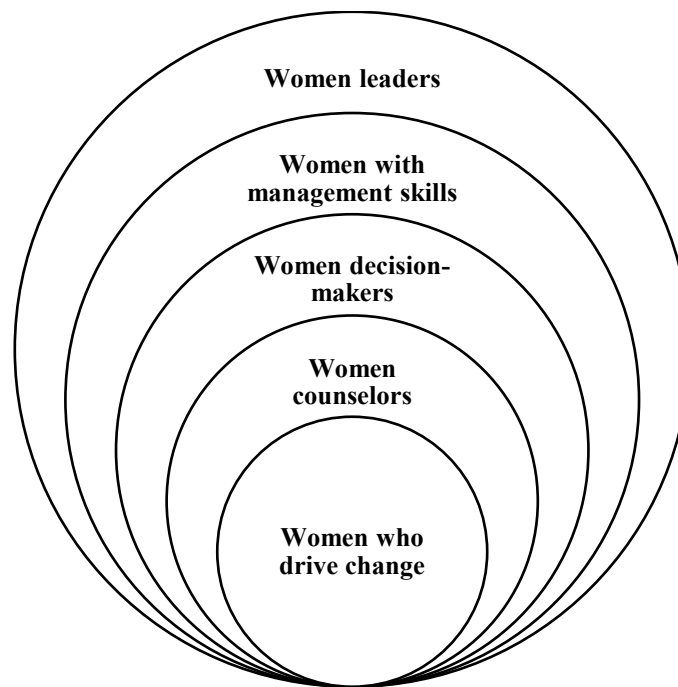


Figure 2. Role Diagram of the Participating Women.

Source: Prepared By The Authors.

Regarding the roles that research raises, the studies of Quintero (2019) and Anjum (2020), which construct a perspective on the role of women in various settings and their political actions; a question linked to our research, but from a community perspective. On the other hand, Rúa et al. (2023), they plan the scenario of sustainability within feminism, which can break with the traditional structure of consumption. This contribution is not part of the research, but it leaves a path of work on the responsible consumption of the natural resources of the Tres Palos lagoon. Now the role of women from the perspective of Phillips (2019), makes sense to solve socio-environmental problems, which is why this work is developed.

Living In A Community Whose Livelihood Depends Closely On The Lagoon

The perspective of women who live in close contact with the Tres Palos Lagoon was extremely interesting. By depending on fisheries to feed their families, generate income, and sustain their homes, they establish a deep connection with their natural environment. It gave us a glimpse into the complex interrelationship between their lives and the ecosystem, where fishing is intertwined with agriculture and domestic tasks.

The dialogue generated during the research revealed a collective understanding. Participants reflected on their role in the community and their desire to generate visible changes locally and in the ecosystem. This demonstrated a deep-rooted subsistence, passed down from generation to generation since the 1960s, which enabled them to adapt to the transformations of the territory.

However, the perception of well-being is closely linked to the health of the lagoon. An abundance of fish, a good fishing season, and the ability to market their products are crucial to ensuring their subsistence. Conversely, the decline in fishery resources due to drought, climate change, and other anthropogenic pressures represents a significant threat to their way of life. This research highlights the vulnerability of these communities to environmental changes and the importance of adopting conservation measures and sustainable management of natural resources.

The women who live near the Tres Palos lagoon revealed a transcendent dimension of their relationship with their environment. Subsistence, beyond being a simple act of survival, stands as a symbol of life, of home, not only for their community but for an interconnected world. The lagoon, in this sense, becomes a microcosm that reflects the entire cosmos they inhabit and construct through their femininity.

The experience showed us how the individual merges with the collective and how personal identity is intimately intertwined with the identity of the ecosystem. The lagoon is not only a natural resource, but a space for encountering oneself and the world through this body of water. It is in this space that they experience a profound sense of belonging and continuity with past generations.

However, this intimate connection with nature makes them especially vulnerable to environmental changes. Pollution, the decline of fishing resources, and abandonment by authorities generate a profound sense of loss and displacement. The lagoon, another source of life and sustenance, becomes a testament to the fragility of ecosystems and social injustice.

Through their experiences, they invited us to reflect on the importance of recognizing and valuing traditional knowledge and ways of life built in harmony with nature. Their experiences revealed that subsistence is not only an economic issue, but also an existential experience deeply rooted in nature, both in body and spirit. Yet, they also raised political issues from a perspective of the feminine and the environmental.

The Political Perspective

In line with the results of this research, the political question emerged based on the role that each participating actor posed within the community. We understand the political perspective from the referents of Haraway (1999), Anjum (2020) and Foster (2021), who propose and transform the results of this research into an understanding of the role of ecofeminism and the approach to socio-environmental issues and their political consequences within the neoliberal model and the discourse of patriarchy, which has not disrupted the power dynamic. On the contrary, it has generated forms of policies to guarantee the heteropatriarchal pattern; in response, ecofeminism emerges as an-episteme that responds to dominant power. Based on this theoretical approach, we break it down in this research and the possible ruptures at the local level based on the findings.

Based on the above, the women of the El Arenal community have adopted a strong political stance regarding the pollution of the Tres Palos Lagoon. Although they recognize the existence of less affected areas and the importance of fishing, they denounce that this ecosystem has become a recipient of the city's

waste. They believe that the lack of effective public policies to protect the lagoon is the result of a disconnect between the tourist center of Acapulco and peripheral communities like El Arenal. This disconnect manifests itself in an inequitable distribution of resources and the prioritization of short-term tourism development over long-term environmental conservation.

The lack of adequate territorial planning has allowed the city to expand uncontrollably, contaminating strategic areas for biodiversity and the ecosystem services provided by the lagoon. This situation not only affects the fauna and flora of the lagoon ecosystems, but also increases the community's vulnerability to natural events such as hurricanes and floods. The women proposed the implementation of environmental management measures at the community level and active participation in institutional decision-making to ensure an equitable distribution of economic resources from tourism and environmental protection, with an emphasis on the ecosystem.

Another crucial point to highlight regarding the women participants in El Arenal is the exclusion of their voices in political decision-making processes. They emphasize the need to be considered as a fundamental driver of community participation. In fact, the results of this research show that it was primarily women who decided to participate, raising their voices and sharing their knowledge. From this perspective, they believe that the only way to make the community's needs visible and promote community-based environmental management is through their active participation. In doing so, they seek a dialogue with the nature in which they operate and foster harmony between human activities and ecosystems.

Women's interpretation of the lagoon-community link (noesis): Their results of Fernández Rincón (2021), explain noesis, a form of interpretation of reality in situations of exclusion and vulnerability, among trans women, cis women, and other minority groups. This explains why the connection between the feminine bond with the ecosystem—where women have observed systemic changes and experience feelings of urgency when highlighting the problem and generating strategies in the face of ecosystem loss—community environmental management emerges. This reflective act they manifest elevates themselves to an intentional process that links their identity as fisherwomen, women in a traditionally masculinized context and as part of an Acapulco whose economic model excludes the possibility of recognizing rural communities—and their intimate relationship with the Tres Palos lagoon.

Without losing sight of the fact that the ecosystem is in constant dynamism, and its continuous observation is not static or a simple “X-ray”, but rather a “video” that develops over time, revealing how these women have managed to examine and identify substantial changes. Although they may not be certain whether these changes are chemical, physical, or biological, they identify and express them through their words and experiences with fishing, contributing this local knowledge to the research based on their lived experience. In line with the findings, they explain Escobar et al. (2024), where people have notions from the experiences acquired from their environment, which allows for knowledge.

The Socio-Environmental Problem

Studies carried out in the Laguna de Tres Palos and surrounding communities Casarrubias-Jaimez et al. (2021), Covarrubias Melgar et al. (2022), Melgar et al. (2022) and, Galán Castro et al. (2023), they have focused on management, environmental issues, pollution, mangroves, fishing, metals, and even risk. None of the previous studies has considered women and their role in ecosystem conservation and local representation for community environmental management. Therefore, this study differs from the aforementioned theoretical references because, by focusing on the perceptions of women in the community, it revealed a complex problem that requires urgent and coordinated action. The Tres Palos Lagoon, a body of water of vital importance to the surrounding communities, is facing socio-environmental problems that affect its ecological balance, impacting the quality of life of fishermen.

The women interviewed identified a wide range of socio-environmental problems affecting the lagoon, which can be classified into two main categories: problems internal to the community, such as excessive solid waste generation, inadequate agricultural practices in nearby areas, domestic wastewater pollution, and overexploitation of fisheries resources; and problems external to the community, attributed to external

actors such as businesses and housing developments that discharge gray and black water effluents resulting from urban expansion, thus exacerbating water pollution and the loss of natural habitats.

It is important to emphasize that these problems do not act in isolation, but are interconnected and feed off each other. For example, water pollution affects the quality of fisheries resources, which in turn drives fishers to use fishing methods that are less harmonious with the ecosystem. The causes of the environmental problems identified are multifactorial and related to social, economic, and political factors. Among the main causes are a lack of environmental awareness, economic pressures that lead to the overexploitation of natural resources, and weak environmental governance, characterized by the absence of effective public policies and a lack of citizen participation in decision-making.

To reverse this situation, a comprehensive approach is needed that encompasses all stakeholders, from local communities to government authorities. The following actions are proposed: strengthening environmental education, implementing solid waste management systems, promoting sustainable agricultural practices, regulating industrial activities, and promoting citizen participation in decision-making related to community environmental management of the lagoon.

These actions could contribute to the conservation of the Tres Palos lagoon; however, it is a complex challenge that requires long-term, coordinated efforts. Therefore, the benefits that will be obtained by protecting this ecosystem are multiple for the communities and the environment.

Community Environmental Management From The Perspective Of Participating Women

The research of Somma & Tolleson-Rinehart (1997), Godden et al. (2020) and, Davis & Ramírez-Andreotta (2021), they allow us to understand participatory scenarios. Community environmental management is built collectively, thanks to the invaluable contribution of the participating women of the El Arenal community in building a scenario of participation, collectivity, and community management, oriented toward the conservation of the Tres Palos Lagoon. Through their perspectives and experiences, they led to the identification of five fundamental pillars (Figure 3):

- *Local knowledge and deep connection to the ecosystem:* Deep knowledge of the ecosystem, recognizing the lagoon as a central element in its identity and daily life.
- *Empowerment through voice and participation:* A platform to express their concerns and visions, a space for dialogue they recognized as historically denied. This empowerment process allowed them to highlight environmental issues both at the community level and within the lagoon itself, transcending their exclusive interaction with their immediate surroundings.
- *Active participation in decision-making:* Community environmental management, due to its horizontal nature, requires the active participation of all stakeholders. The women of El Arenal see themselves as agents of change, capable of influencing decision-making.
- *Social and community cohesion:* An integrative vision, they also took on leading roles in disseminating the information collected. Their commitment translated into raising community awareness about the importance of conservation.
- *Women as guardians of knowledge and promoters of conservation:* Women's ancestral knowledge of agriculture, fishing, and backyard animal husbandry stands as a fundamental tool for conservation. Their experience, combined with their ability to communicate, makes them ideal spokespersons for highlighting environmental issues and proposing solutions.

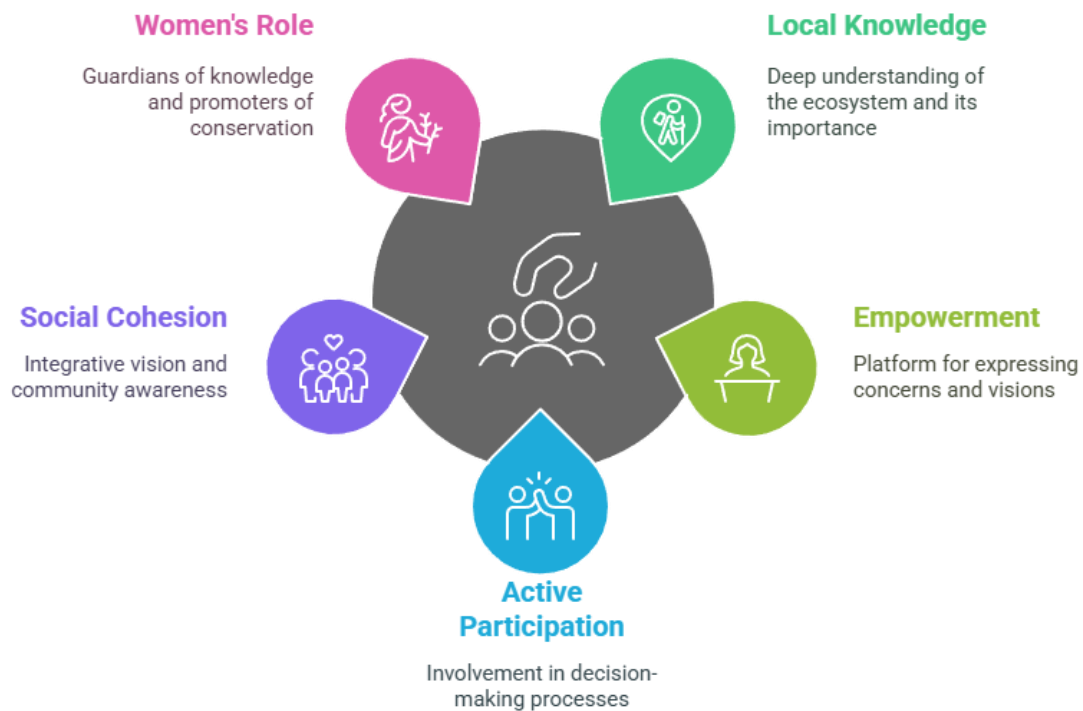


Figure 3. Integrative framework for community environmental management through collaborative work with women.

Source: prepared by the authors.

Conclusions

While the objective of this research was to examine the role of women in building community environmental management in the Arenal community, this objective was successfully achieved, concrete actions remain pending. Intersectoral and intergovernmental processes and public policies are needed to replicate these women's experiences in other communities that interact with the Tres Palos lagoon. The following conclusions emerge from the analysis:

First. An intimate connection with the environment: The women of the El Arenal community have developed a deep connection with the Tres Palos lagoon. Their profound knowledge of the ecosystem transcends traditional gender, work, or political roles, consolidating them as leaders for the conservation of this body of water that has provided them with sustenance and identity for decades. Through their stories, the participants reveal the existence of a shared fragility between the lagoon ecosystem and themselves, emphasizing the need for its protection.

Second. Political participation and collective opinion: According to the participants, women in the community have rarely participated actively in community-level decision-making. However, this research reveals a change in this dynamic. Women are speaking out, forging a space for citizen participation through which they express their concerns about the territory and the problems the community faces in its interaction with the lagoon.

Third. The strategic role of women in the conservation of the Tres Palos lagoon: their local knowledge, based on experience and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, demonstrates their capacity to lead conservation processes. The women recognized the transformations of the territory and the importance of promoting sustainable practices, especially in relation to fishing, a crucial economic activity for the community.

Fourth. The importance of local knowledge in community environmental management: Daily interaction with fishing and agriculture has allowed women to develop a deep understanding of natural resource management. This knowledge, passed down from generation to generation, emphasizes the importance of harmony between humans and their environment. As a suggestion, it is crucial that public policies integrate this local knowledge in order to design effective and contextualized community environmental management strategies.

Fifth. Environmental and social challenges and obstacles: Women identify uncontrolled economic development and the gentrification of Acapulco as the main threats to the Tres Palos Lagoon and the livelihoods of the communities that depend on it. The decline in fishing, pollution, and ecosystem degradation are urgent problems that must be addressed through planning and land management, recognizing the complexity of the situation and avoiding triumphalist rhetoric that obscures the real issues.

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