

ECOFEMINISM: A NEW CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Ecofeminism, or ecological feminism, is a term coined in 1974 by Françoise d'Eaubonne. It is a philosophy and movement born from the union of feminist and ecological thinking, and the belief that the social mentality that leads to the domination and oppression of women is directly connected to the social mentality that leads to the abuse of the environment. It combines eco-anarchism or bioregional democracy with a strong ideal of feminism. Its advocates often emphasize the importance of interrelationships between humans, non-human others (e.g., animals and insects), and the earth.

Feminism is concerned with the way in which women in general have been subordinated to men in general. Ecology is concerned that human activity is destroying the viability of the global ecosystem. Ecofeminism argues that the two are linked. Ecofeminism has a major contribution to make to our understanding of the current destructive relationship between humanity and nonhuman nature. As its name implies, ecofeminism brings together the insights of feminism and ecology:

The key issue for ecological economics is not sex-gender difference but the gendering of human societies.

For ecofeminists the most important aspect of the present global economy is that it represents a value system that subordinates both women and nature and sees itself as superior to traditional subsistence economies. The modern economic system is based on a dualistic hierarchy of values mainly expressed through money/profit but also as prestige. External to these values are the unvalued or undervalued, the resilience of the ecosystem, the unpaid and unrecognized domestic work of women, and the social reciprocity in communal societies as represented in non-market economies.

A central tenet in ecofeminism states that male ownership of land has led to a dominator culture (patriarchy), manifesting itself in food export, over-grazing, the tragedy of the commons, exploitation of people, and an abusive land ethic, in which animals and land are valued only as economic resources. Other ecofeminists explain how the degradation of nature contributes to the degradation of women.

The link between women's subordination and the degradation of the natural world lies in women's centrality to the support economies of reproduction, unpaid domestic work and social reciprocity -- i.e. the home and the community. The unvalued economy is the world of women, of women's experience - a WE- economy. The valued economy, on the other hand, is male-dominated, representing men's experience - a ME-economy.

Ecofeminist political economy offers an explanation of how destructive economic systems are constructed and sees the WE-economy as the basis of an alternative, non-exploiting, sustainable economy. Because the ME-economy has largely left women behind, in the lives and experience of women lies the possibility of an alternative path. Throughout history, women have formed the backbone of economic and social systems, although their work has been largely unacknowledged.

What would an ecofeminist economy look like?

1. There would be a shift of focus from disembodied and disembodied structures to patterns of work and consumption that are sensitive to the human life cycle and to ecological sustainability.

2. Local production would be oriented to local needs using sustainable local resources with minimal waste.

3. Basic food provisioning would be local and seasonal. Food would be grown locally where possible, but direct purchasing arrangements could also be agreed upon with local farmers. Farmers' markets would be encouraged where they do not already exist.

4. Provisioning of necessary goods and services would be the main focus of economic systems, not money-making. It should be possible for people to live and work entirely within a provisioning system.

5. The emphasis would be on useful work rather than employment. That is, people would not need to do harmful work in order to have a livelihood. Any additional profit-based economic activity would be subject to stringent resource/pollution and labour exploitation rules.

6. Work and life would be integrated. The workplace and living base would be interactive. People of all ages and abilities would share activities. Households would vary from single person to multi-person.

7. Necessary work would be fulfilling and shared by both genders. Work and leisure would interact. Festivals and other celebratory activities would regularly punctuate productive work.

8. Inter-regional and international trade would be seen as a cultural as much as an economic exchange. Travel would be undertaken for education and communication rather than consumption.

9. Personal security would rest in the social reciprocity of a provisioning WE-economy rather than in money accumulation systems, particularly in old age.

Building an economic system which truly values women and nature requires clear vision and understanding, as well as much political work, beginning in the local communities where everyone lives.

There are good reasons why feminist and ecological approaches to economic transformation are intertwined and interdependent, so understanding and drawing from feminist perspectives can strengthen ecological economics both theoretically and in its uses and applications.

In fact, feminist ecological economics is already helping to generate a new vision of an economy which is socially and ecologically sustainable – and to show how to bring it into existence.