

# **Feminist Ecological Economics**

**Patricia E. Perkins<sup>1</sup>**

## I. Introduction

Feminist ecological economics links gender and ecological perspectives both theoretically and practically, providing justification and impetus for considering gender, intersectionality, and ecology together in relation to economic activity. Such analysis reveals the material links between biophysical reproduction and social reproduction, and their importance for economies, despite their generally being undercounted and/or externalized. Feminist ecological economics analysis also generates important and timely insights about how economies might be structured differently to prioritize equity, ecological and political sustainability, and interspecies or ecosystemic well-being (Salleh 1997, 2009; Gibson-Graham and Miller 2015).

Feminist ecological economics is closely related to ecofeminist economics, which is somewhat more critical since it is built on extensive ecofeminist analysis of the links between feminism and ecology. Both fields problematize and critique economies and economics from intersectional feminist standpoints. These fields are also intertwined with feminist political ecology, postcolonial feminisms, the subsistence approach theory, materialist ecofeminism, Indigenous feminisms, gender and development, feminist commons theory, and feminist degrowth theory (see Mellor 2002; Nixon 2015; Dengler; Akram-Lodhi and Rao; Tsikata and Torvikey; and Agarwal, this volume).

An example of the interconnections among gendered social and work roles, ecosystem services, and the goods and services that sustain societies (O'Hara 1997a), is provided by the water / care / unpaid work nexus. Water, a necessity of life, is particularly important in the lives of most women worldwide, who are made responsible via socially prescribed gender roles for cleaning, health-, child-, and elder-care, food processing and cooking, and in many places for agriculture. All of these work roles require water as an input. In neoclassical economic terms, water is a factor of production for these goods and services. It also is a tool or means for doing the work: more water and easier water access make the work easier, so there is a tradeoff between water use efficiency and work time / worker productivity. (Provision of water and related services is also racialized, classed, underpaid, and linked everywhere to poverty and marginalization.) Although water falls from the sky for free nearly everywhere people live (Gebara 1999), it is often commodified, diverted, priced, and used by some to control those who are less powerful.

When water infrastructure is inadequate or breaks down due to floods, droughts, or disruption of traditional livelihood systems, women must spend more of their time organizing, seeking and supplying water for households and communities. This means they have less time for teaching, skills transmission, care, and efficient provision of food and other necessities of life, so social reproduction can be adversely impacted along with biophysical reproduction. When water supplies are polluted by such toxins as lead,

pesticides etc. – side effects of economic production activities – women’s and children’s bodies are often disproportionately affected (requiring more care), sometimes with genetic, intergenerational impacts on people as well as the ecosystems that humans depend upon. Yet women, experts on these relationships through their socio-economic roles, often have less voice and agency in political decision-making due to taboos, lower education access, and time restrictions, so governance is deprived of their knowledge and perspectives. By systematically and often violently constraining women’s working and social lives, underpaying them, and limiting their options, economic systems worldwide are built upon vast amounts of women’s unpaid labor, which has been estimated as equal in value to one-half or more of GDP (Swiebel 1999:8; Ferrant et al. 2014; van de Ven et al. 2018). In parallel, the economic contributions of ecosystem services and inputs are usually undervalued and unsustainable by market systems managed by governments. Feminist ecological economics focuses on the spiraling feedbacks of these relationships, the causes and effects of this systematic externalization of both ecosystem inputs / services and the gendered, often unpaid work in economic systems.

Climate chaos and extreme weather events caused by greenhouse gas emissions, resulting from economic activities whose costs and benefits are very inequitably distributed, heighten the urgency of using intersectional feminist perspectives to address ecosystem and socio-economic system interrelationships together.

## II. Feminist Ecological Economics and Provisioning

This chapter’s brief overview of feminist ecological economics is organized according to five central aspects of provisioning, which are the starting point for a non-mainstream feminist economics (Power 2004): the centrality of unpaid and caring labor; human and environmental well-being; human agency (oriented toward social justice); ethical judgements, especially regarding valuation; and the relationships among gender and other identities, power, and the environment. The close linkages among these five aspects help to structure a political and theoretical strategy for grounding sustainable economies in feminist methodologies and justice initiatives. This strategy builds on the work of many ecofeminist economists who have been working in this terrain since at least the early 1990s.

### A. Unpaid and caring labor

Care work, largely done everywhere by women, reproduces and sustains human society physically and socially. Ecosystems, through their own reproduction, make possible human life and are also affected by human economies. Centering care highlights the crucial and gendered relationships between care work and reproduction of human society, as well as the time intensity, unpredictable demands, and urgency of care work (Mies 1986; Folbre 1995; Jochimsen and Knobloch 1997; Folbre and Nelson 2000; Halme et al. 2002; Jochimsen 2003; Folbre and Bittman 2004; Federici 2009, 2012; Bauhardt and Harcourt 2018). Because care needs occur in “biological time,” not clock time (Mellor 1997a:129; Brennan 1997), and since its quality and effectiveness depend on personal relationships, experiential knowledge, and volition, care work is difficult to control, commodify or price

(Akbulut 2017). Multi-tasking and overlapping productive activities also complicate the valuation of care and other community and household work, as Marilyn Waring noted (Waring 1998, 2018). Similarly, complex ecosystem functions such as pollination, water purification in wetlands, multi-use forests, and soil maintenance are not easily incorporated into market-based valuation systems or protected through corporate or regulatory means. This may be a cause of their economic externalization – or, in other words, a reason why economic systems fail to recognize, and therefore are in grave danger of harming, some of the most efficient, elegant and appropriate relationships upon which human and more-than-human life depends. A more clear-eyed feminist view is that gendered power relations—manifested for example in violence against women, control over women’s bodies, pay inequity, discriminatory land and property ownership rules, and ever-inadequate environmental protections—are expressly designed to ensure that vital reproductive care work by women and ecosystems continues to be provided to economies controlled by men, with little need for profit-reducing compensation.

The climate crisis both motivates and makes possible a fundamental restructuring of societies to put ecological, care-based flourishing at the heart of human activity (rather than, for example, economic growth) in order to protect “the real bottom line: ecological integrity” (Salleh 2009: 306).

## B. Human and environmental well-being

Human links with the biosphere involve far more than people’s use of minerals, water, animals and plants as economic resources. When we see humanity as part of the web of life, it is easier to understand how our own health and well-being are intricately interwoven with those of the more-than-human world. Ecofeminist authors and activists have long explored these connections (e.g. Carson 1962; Warren 1987, 1997; Mellor 1992, 1997b; Zein-Elabdin 1996; Colborn et al. 1996; Nelson 1997; Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies 1999; Hawthorne 2002; Perkins 2007). Women’s reproductive health, environmental hazards, all living beings, and future generations are connected in “socio-environmental time” (Adam 1998: 11). The long time frames in which environmental processes and hazards unfold must be recognized in responsible social and political praxis that usually takes place on much shorter time-scales (Mellor 1997a:137-138). Indigenous practices of seeing the human present in relation to past and coming generations illustrate the wisdom of situating current human decisions and actions in a time frame long enough, and an interspecies vision broad enough, to contextualize human hubris (McGregor 2008; Whyte 2014; LaDuke 2014; Awâsis 2014).

To protect human and environmental well-being, ecofeminist perspectives envision sensitive, responsible, respectful relationships as foundations for human collective action, emphasizing precautionary policies and democratic processes (Code 2006: 32).

## C. Human agency, power, and social justice

Justice is central to two expanding areas of feminist ecological economics research: calls for ecological economics, and indeed all of economics, to integrate a justice-oriented frame

in order to be more relevant, responsible, and sustainable (Nelson 2008; Spencer et al. 2018; Ruder and Sanniti 2019); and climate justice, which means addressing the climate crisis's disproportionate impacts on those least responsible for causing it, especially women (Terry 2009; Buckingham and Kulcur 2009; B athge 2010; Nelson 2012; Kaijser and Kronsell 2014; Nagel 2015; Buckingham and Le Masson 2017; Cohen 2017). Climate chaos exacerbates the long-standing intersectional gender-based economic inequities that are highlighted in gender and development research (Godfrey and Torres 2016; Whyte 2017; Singer 2019; Perkins 2019b).

Feminist economists from around the world who have studied gender and development emphasize the close and inequitable relationship among gender roles, property access, life possibilities and political agency, which penalize and subjugate women in comparison with men, and the many ways that ecological crises and climate change differentially threaten women (Boserup 1970; Elson 1988; Shiva 1988; Agarwal 1992, 1994, 2007; Braidotti et al. 1994; Harcourt 1994; Beneria 2003; Quiroga Martinez 2005; Muthuki 2006; MacGregor 2010). This research has generated an expanding literature focusing on "climate justice as gender justice" (R ohr et al. 2008; Terry 2009) and highlighted the pressing need for attention to gender-based economic inequities such as those related to education, poverty, land and housing access, health, and political exclusion, which exacerbate the impacts of climate change over time and across generations (Perkins 2019a). Ecofeminist contributions to the climate-justice movement grounded in long-standing gendered economic injustices, women's environmental activism, and the centrality of sustainable provisioning have growing political resonance. This urgency is based on recognition that addressing the climate crisis requires multiple, rapid, creative and efficient initiatives at local and community levels as well as top-down policy changes.

#### D. Ethics of valuation

Feminist ecological economists have developed various methods for protecting and valuing care work and ecosystem services through collective, contextual and socially or communally mediated political processes. Valuation and decision-making must involve the considered weighing of views from all members of the society (one person, one vote), not just those with stakes in the market economy (one dollar, one vote). Ecofeminists have contributed to the literature on deliberative or "discourse-based valuation:" valuation derived from a facilitated discussion process that includes those affected by the political decision for which the valuation is being done (O'Hara 1997b; Perkins 2001; Squires 2008; Fortnam et al. 2019). Such processes can allow for the views and contributions of groups, not just individuals, and of nature (through the inclusion of scientific and traditional ecological knowledge), by building shared understandings about ecosystem functions and their importance. This process implies blending equity-enhancing identity-grounded discussions with political-economic decision-making (LaDuke 2014: 238; Agarwal 2000; Nelson 2013). Examples include participatory processes for valuing marine-protected areas, HIV/AIDS healthcare services, biodiversity conservation, and river basin management (Kenter et al. 2016).

Money itself, the principal means of economic valuation, is created and guaranteed at present by banking systems or governments to fulfill political and business priorities; why not instead allow money to be created by communities to recognize care as the source of wealth and to ensure sufficient provisioning for all? (Mellor 2009, 2018). Since money, economic priorities, and governance systems are all socially constructed, they can be reshaped, through equitable participation, in order to redistribute income and wealth more fairly, speed decolonization, protect the rights of diverse populations, and facilitate manifold ecologically-appropriate local socio-economic systems (MacGregor 2014, Whyte and Cuomo 2016, Whyte 2016, Nelson and Power 2018, Dengler and Seebacher 2019; Waring 2018).

That humans can occupy ecosystems without destroying them is demonstrated by Indigenous governance systems that protected ecosystems and human livelihoods over thousands of years. These protective practices often employed such means as participatory discourse, extensive leadership training led by elders, multidirectional political and cultural constraints on power and greed, and balanced gender roles. Examples include North American Northwest Coast salmon fishery-based economies, which flourished for more than 2,000 years (Trosper 2009), and Aboriginal farming and fishing economies, which extended for dozens of thousands of years in Australia (Pascoe 2014; McGregor 2004; Whyte 2014; Simpson 2017; Starblanket and Stark 2018). Indigenous women's activist leadership worldwide is transforming the political landscape related to extraction, fossil fuels, pipelines, and environmental protection in general, highlighting the necessity of "rematriation" of land to Indigenous peoples. Not only are Indigenous peoples the rightful owners, they also possess a spiritual connection to the land along with governance traditions and institutions capable of sustainably protecting it (Hernandez-Castillo 2010; Kuokkanen 2011; Awâsis 2014; Siwila 2014; Nixon 2015; Kermoal & Altamirano-Jimenez 2016; Green 2017; Chemhuru 2018). For example, the Indigenous resurgence in Canada helped to elect Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in 2016 and continues to press for stronger environmental action at scales from the local to the global (Tomiak 2016; Whyte 2016; Perkins 2017).

All these ideas—extending from ethical valuation through just livelihoods and provisioning for all to ecological socio-economic sustainability—begin from an ethic of care, respect for diversity, participation, and ecosystem relationships.

#### E. Intersectionality

The compounding effects of different aspects of identity beyond gender (such as race, class, Indigeneity, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation)—that is, intersectionality—is fundamental to feminist analysis (MacGregor 2010; Kings 2017). Some feminist economists such as Agarwal (2007) see gender inequality as distinct due to patriarchal traditions and the restricted access of the female half of humanity to property and political agency. Many studies show that not just women, but all who are othered, face material constraints embedded in economic systems. These constraints include land restrictions, hiring and wage discrimination, restricted education access, polluted living conditions, health and care injustices, which are not only inequitable but hamper economies overall

(Rocheleau et al. 1996; Power 2004; Dunn 2009; Elmhirst 2011; Beuchler and Hansen 2015; Konsmo and Pacheco 2016; Bauhardt and Harcourt 2018).

Feminist ecological research and activism in areas ranging from degrowth, commons, and climate justice to care and unpaid work emphasize that democracy and equity, acknowledging and addressing intersectionality, are fundamental for changing the unjust status quo (Tuana 2013; Ostrom 2014; Godfrey and Torres 2016; Kronsell 2017; Spencer et al. 2018). This work, led by ecofeminist activists and economists who recognize the political implications of their ideas, is oriented toward building social alliances to create democratic, equitable, sustainable futures for all.

### III. Conclusion: Towards Just, Sustainable Futures

Feminist ecological economics builds a cogent and compelling critique of the unstable and unsustainable capitalist status quo. Feminist ecological economists describe the economic importance of women's environmental, home/care, and community work, the importance of ecological processes for women's work and health, and the fundamental economic significance of the myriad unmarketed services provided by women and ecosystems. They document women's crucial role in subsistence production, social and physical reproduction, and the protection and preservation of ecosystems, as well as their leadership in political struggles over ecosystems and commons. They bring an intersectional understanding of exclusion, and highlight the importance of diversity in politics and economics.

Motivated in part by the climate crisis, this work is contributing to an outpouring of new research and activism related to provisioning, care, nonmarket valuation, human and ecosystem well-being, quality of life indicators, links between health and the environment, local economic systems, trade and globalization, money and finance, decolonization, commons, degrowth, and many other areas—all elements of crucial and comprehensive strategies for building a fairer and more sustainable world.

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<sup>1</sup> I write as a white female academic and environmental activist, now living on territory in Toronto, Ontario, which was violently taken from Indigenous peoples. I have also lived in the U.S., Brazil, and Mozambique, where colonialism and economic injustices also continue to distort social relations. These histories, and collaborations with partners and colleagues in many places, have influenced this chapter. It is impossible to adequately represent the wide range and creative diversity of global ideas related to feminist ecological economics—many other voices deserve to be read and heard.

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