

## **Sustainability: An Ecofeminist Perspective**

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### **Crynodeb**

Bydd y papur hwn yn archwilio natur ddadleuol cynaliadwyedd o safbwynt ffeminydd, gan ganolbwyntio ar gysyniad cynaliadwyedd a hyrwyddwyd gan ecofeministiaeth. Y nod yw archwilio i ba raddau a sut mae ecofeministiaeth yn hyrwyddo cynaliadwyedd a chyfiawnder cymdeithasol mewn cymdeithas trwy ddefnyddio'r cysyniad gyda sefyllfa menywod mewn cymdeithas.

**Geiriau allweddol:** Ecofeministiaeth, cynaliadwyedd, anghydraddoldeb, amgylchedd

### **Abstract**

This paper will explore the contested nature of sustainability from a feminist perspective, focusing on the concept of sustainability advanced by ecofeminism. My aim is to explore to what extent and how ecofeminism promotes sustainability and social justice in society by applying the concept to the situation of women in society.

**Key words:** Ecofeminism, sustainability, inequality, environment

## **Introduction**

Sustainability is a global issue and does not simply apply to the natural world. In a broad sense, the term refers to the challenge of using natural resources in such a way that we can meet the needs of today's population without compromising the livelihood of future generations (Warren, 1997). Sustainability can be applied to nature, societies and groups within society. However, the concept and its application are contested as there are many theories of sustainability, such as ecofeminism, eco-socialism and deep ecology. This paper will explore the contested nature of sustainability from a feminist perspective, focusing on the concept of sustainability advanced by ecofeminism. My aim is to explore to what extent and how ecofeminism promotes sustainability and social justice in society by applying the concept to the situation of women in society.

## **Defining ecofeminism**

The term ecofeminism was first used by Françoise D'Eaubonne in 1972 with the formation of *Écologie Feminisme* (see Dryzek, 2005: 186). A political and philosophical theory, it combines environmental and feminist concerns into a multidimensional perspective of theories (Warren, 1997; Chen, 2014). Its main aim is to try to “rebuild the cultural values of society so as to obtain the liberation of women and nature” (Chen, 2014, p. 105). Ecofeminism developed in tandem with the women's movement and the ecological movements of the 1970s, both of which emerged in critical reaction to the increasing impact of globalisation (Chen 2014). At this time, industrialisation, and its high demand for resources was leading to an escalation of multiple pressures on women. Chen argues, that when women finally acted against ecological destruction, they developed the theory of ecofeminism. Thus, from its outset, ecofeminism was based on the assumption that ‘patriarchal violence against women, other people and nature’ were closely linked with the destruction of ecological systems (Mies and Shiva, 1993, p. 14). However, it was only in the context of the protests against environmental issues during the 1980s in the U.S.A. that the term was used more widely and regularly (Mies and Shiva, 1993).

## **Woman's relationship with nature**

Ecofeminists argue that female oppression and domination of nature are deeply connected. They argue that environmental change is necessary as it would help overcome the oppression of women (Green Fuse, 2015). As a result, Ecofeminism ‘seeks radical changes in ecological consciousness’ (Dryzek, 2005, p. 185). Its supporters claim that environmental issues are caused not by ‘anthropocentrism (human domination of nature) but rather androcentrism (male domination of everything)’ (Dryzek, 2005, p. 185). According to Dryzek (2005), environmental and social issues are a consequence of a patriarchal system in which women and nature are treated alike.

Some ecofeminists see women as having a deeper relationship with nature than men as they carry babies, give birth to children and nurture them (Dryzek, 2005; Mies and Shiva, 1993). However, human reproduction is no longer seen solely in terms of ‘human regeneration’ (Mies and Shiva, 1993, p. 26). Pregnant women are seen to be ‘the raw material from which the product is extracted’; the baby, therefore,

is a 'product', while human reproduction, rather than being understood as a mother creating life, is seen as a process by which a doctor produces the product (Mies and Shiva, 1993). In the past, the focus was on the unity of mother and baby, but due to the advances in technology and the labour market, the focus is now on the 'foetal outcome' controlled by everyone except for the mother herself (Mies and Shiva, 1993, p. 26). The natural biology of women and the reproductive system have been reduced to a form of duty to the labour market (Dryzek, 2005).

Women are also seen as having close links with nature as daily-life decisions concerning environmental sustainability are mostly reliant on them (Dobscha, 1993). Women are the majority of consumers, with 80 per cent of household shopping being done by women (Berk, 1988 *cited in* Dobscha, 1993). Therefore, environment-related purchase behaviour is largely determined by women; they decide whether or not to buy non-biodegradable nappies or other products that may not be environmentally sustainable (Dobscha, 1993). There is a new burden placed on women to be environmentally conscious and to take on a new role as a mother or caregiver of the planet (Dobscha, 1993). Women are closely linked with nature due to their ability to give birth and their role as a mother and a woman.

Dryzek (2005) suggests that the liberation of women is closely linked with the liberation of nature and that both depend upon the elimination of patriarchy. Regarding patriarchy, ecofeminists argue that there is always one seen as superior, 'always thriving, and progressing at the expense of the other' (Mies and Shiva, 1993, p. 5). In other words: 'nature is subordinated to man; woman to man; consumption to production; and the local to the global' (Mies and Shiva, 1993, p. 5). Dryzek (1993) argues that patriarchy has to be seen as a cultural and social construct rather than a natural state. This view is supported by the fact that not all societies discriminate against women. In order to find inspiration for a post-patriarchal society, Ecofeminists look back to matriarchal societies prior to the period of modern industrialization and revolution (Dryzek, 1993). Ecofeminists believe that industrialization and globalisation have created the issue of patriarchy (Dryzek, 1993). Merchant (1988 *cited in* Mies and Shiva, p. 44) suggests:

That modern natural sciences...are based above all on the destruction and subordination of nature as a living organism – and indeed an organism understood as female – and that at the end of this process nature is considered only as a dead raw material, which is dissected into its smallest elements and recombined by the great engineer into new machines which totally obey his will.

### **Women a diverse category?**

While ecofeminism offers a vigorous critique of contemporary society, it indeed has its limitations (Brohman, 1996). Brohman (1996) argues that the main limitation of ecofeminism is its failure to recognise the diversity within the category 'women'. Brohman (1996) asks whether all women have the same interests and whether these interests coincide with the need for sustainability. Not all women experience subordination and inequality, therefore they may not feel as though ecofeminism applies to them (Brohman, 1996). The term 'woman' refers to their biology and does not take into account other inequalities that women also face, such as class, ethnicity and religion (Brohman, 1996). Ecofeminism ignores inequality's multidimensionality and the fact that individuals face inequality due to a number of

protected characteristics (Brohman, 1996). The concerns of a wealthy woman and the concerns of a woman living in poverty would most probably not be the same; a wealthy woman can afford to be concerned about the environment and sustainability as she can afford to pay the premium on environmentally friendly products, whereas a woman living in poverty is more likely to have to negotiate her environmental concerns with the need to live within her means (Brohman, 1996). Such an individual is moreover more likely to face far greater obstacles in planning for the future and to avoid negative consequences that may later arise from a previous decision (Eaton and Lorentzen, 2003).

### **Women and inequality**

Women face inequality throughout life, whether it be in society, in the home or at work. Women on a whole are more likely to be in low paid jobs, part-time employment as well as to be the main caregiver as a lone parent (Fawcett Society, 2015). In addition, women face inequality in the home as they are usually responsible for looking after their families. They are also more likely than men to take on unpaid work, such as caring for elderly relatives (Fawcett Society, 2015). The Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that 20 per cent of women are currently living in poverty compared to 15 per cent of men (JRF, 2014). In 2011, women were also more likely to be living in material deprivation and absolute poverty than men (JRF, 2014). When women, especially lone mothers, find work, they are often faced with low wages, unequal pay or discrimination (Fawcett Society, 2015). Women sometimes find themselves in a better financial position when claiming benefits compared to taking up part-time work due to the discrimination they face in the workplace (Fawcett Society, 2015). As a result of unequal pay, couples with children find it often more beneficial for the woman to stay at home and look after the children rather than the man (Fawcett Society, 2015).

Women living in poverty face many challenges, including the cost of childcare and the challenge as lone parents to provide for their children financially, emotionally and materially (JRF, 2014). 14 per cent of working lone parent mothers have a family living in poverty whilst 30 per cent of workless lone mothers are living in poverty (JRF, 2014). Conversely, women living in a relationship are less likely to be living in poverty due to the partner's income (JRF, 2014). Thus, women living in poverty are unable to afford childcare, therefore they cannot work; they also face the issue of being the main caregiver which means that if they were to work they would most probably only be able to work part time as they have to bring and collect their children from school and care for them (JRF, 2014).

Fawcett Society (2015) holds that a significant power differential between men and women. Regarding the effects of taxation the Society states that:

Decisions on tax and spending affect women and men very differently. For example, cuts to public spending – whether that is services where women make up 65 per cent of the workforce or welfare benefits – will inevitably hit women much harder than men. Whereas tax increases or tax breaks will impact on men more as they earn and own more (Fawcett Society, 2015)

### Women and politics

Women are underrepresented in politics and very few women make up local governing bodies (Fawcett Society, 2015). Only 32 per cent of the European Parliament is made up of women. In Wales the number of women in parliament is even less at 27 per cent. The lack of women in parliament is an issue for gender equality as the decisions currently being made about service cuts have a direct impact on women, the main cuts relating to child and social care. It is unsustainable to continue in such way as decisions are being made for women who make up around 50 per cent of the population without their needs or opinions being voiced and considered (Fawcett Society, 2015). Although parliament is mainly made up of men, there are policies to promote women's equality, policies such as the Equality Act, Equal Pay Act, Maternity Laws and so on (Fawcett Society, 2015).

### Ecofeminists and the empowerment of women

Statistical evidence confirms that women are facing inequality. Ecofeminists argue that economic growth did not improve women's economic situation despite expectations to the contrary (Mies and Shiva, 1993). This was because women were excluded from the labour market, and their caring or unpaid work was exploited (Mies and Shiva, 1993).

Women must empower themselves and challenge their subordination through their own choices and actions (Warren, 1997). Ecofeminists argue that women must take on a male lifestyle in which they should gain power and by doing so they can challenge society (Warren, 1997). If more women were to enter positions of power within the labour market and politics then it would be possible to preserve the natural world and womanhood (Mies and Shiva, 1993). Political changes must be made for equality across 'humanity and nature', but cultural and social change is the largest issue (Mies and Shiva, 1993), it can take decades (Plumwood, 2002 *cited in* Dryzek, 2005). According to Warren, a social revolution is possible, although change is difficult in the face of the current ideology and its accepted social construction of womanhood (Warren, 1997).

Through empowering women and nature, a world based on principles of justice and sustainable development can be created (Mies and Shiva, 1993). Ecofeminists argue that empowerment of women would lead to the empowerment of nature due to women's close link with nature which would allow them to empathise more than men with ecological issues such as animal cruelty or the destruction of nature (Mies and Shiva, 1993). Ecofeminists believe that if the future of the earth is currently at risk, it is crucial to preserve and empower what currently exists. Mies and Shiva (1993, p. 14) state that 'in defying this patriarchy we are loyal to future generations and to life on this planet itself'. In other words, the future of the planet is in the hands of current population and it is in their best interest to protect and enhance it. Ecofeminists aim to create a sustainable community and a sustainable world through the empowerment of women and nature as they cannot be reduced to mere components in the production process, whether it be natural materials turned into goods or the reproduction of human beings (Mies and Shiva, 1993).

### Conclusion

Women still face inequality in the twenty first century although there are frameworks and policies that exist to empower women. Previous frameworks for equality have

worked only to some extent as inequality still exists (UN, 2014). The United Nations Development Programme created a Gender Equality Strategy 2014–2017 (UN, 2014). The strategy states that:

The sustainable development pathways area of work provides an opportunity to address inequalities and reshape policies to empower women and girls in all their diversity, so that they can become catalytic agents of change and equal partners with men in the quest to promote growth that is inclusive, just, equitable and sustainable. With women's engagement, success in eradicating poverty, promoting sustainable consumption and production patterns and sustainable management of natural resources can be achieved (UN, 2014, p. 9).

The document outlines a number of frameworks that can build an inclusive and sustainable society (UN, 2014). Other UN policies are designed to foster transparency related to inequalities in pay for women and men (UN, 2014). The transparency framework also outlines strategies to empower women and give them the same access to status as men have (UN, 2014). The frameworks and strategies that have been developed in the past have improved women's positions in society, yet women are still subordinated (UN, 2014). Further improvements are needed alongside a critique of social views regarding gender inequality (UN, 2014).

To conclude, ecofeminism argues that women's oppression is tied to the oppression of the natural world and that the only way to overcome this oppression is by assuming a masculine role, challenging social stereotypes and barriers that women and nature face. It is important to all women in society that they challenge such behaviour as a sustainable world cannot be created without sustainable societies. It is understood that not all women face oppression, yet all of nature does. It should thus be in the interest of women to protect nature today to ensure a world for future generations. A world based on principles of justice, equality, participation and transparency can be achieved, if members of society work as one to empower women and free nature from destruction. It is unsustainable to continue to reduce women or nature to materials of capitalism.

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