

## FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON SUSTAINABILITY

**Sherilyn MacGregor**

*Lancaster University, UK*

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### Summary

This paper raises several points concerning the convergence and divergence of feminist and non-feminist approaches to sustainability. The fundamental divergence is the lack of a gender analysis in the non-feminist sustainability literature. Ecofeminists, on the other hand, have argued that without the inclusion of feminist concerns for diversity in general and gender equality in particular, most green approaches are incomplete and may even threaten to intensify women's subordination. This problem has been observed in discussions of policy-making, ethics, work, community, citizenship, political participation, urban environments. It is clear that many of the debates and criticisms that feminists have had of other social and political theories have been reproduced in new sustainability-oriented discourses. Perhaps the most evident convergence is that both ecofeminists and radical environmentalists tend to seek the fundamental restructuring of economic, social, political and spatial relations and view the creation of a coordinated social movement (often called a rainbow coalition) as vital to social justice and planetary survival. It is clear to this author, however, that unless the gaps in green political analyses are filled, ecofeminists will be reluctant to join in a coalition for sustainability.

A major gap in mainstream environmental paradigms would be filled by incorporating feminist and ecofeminist concerns into a more inclusive definition of sustainability that has the potential to address more completely the interrelationships between social equity and environmental destruction. From a critical analysis of the contemporary scholarship, it may be concluded that some of the necessary (but not necessarily sufficient) conditions of a feminist sustainability are: an ethical perspective that is based on solidarity, reciprocity, and non-hierarchical and non-violent relationships among and within human societies and between humans, non-humans, and the ecosystem; the revaluation of unpaid household and community work and an understanding of its centrality to any human economy -- this involves a redefinition of “work” to include the creation of socially necessary and desirable goods (survival and life-enriching needs) as well as the provision of socially necessary services (caring, teaching, provisioning, cleaning, etc.); the equitable distribution of paid and unpaid among men and women -- this requires the transcending of public-private dualism and the socialization, rather than the privatization, of the responsibility for sustaining human life; socio-political arrangements that foster cultural and political diversity, based on an expanded notion of citizenship as well as the notion of multiple publics; and non-sexist sustainable cities that take the different identities, abilities, needs, and experiences of diverse publics into account -- this entails a de-gendering of urban space and a re-claiming of the urban commons.

## **1. Introduction**

This article presents an overview of recent work by feminists on the topic of sustainability. Although feminist scholars (ecofeminists in particular) have been concerned with the state of the natural environment for several decades, it is only recently that some have taken up directly the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development. Because feminism is by nature a critical-visionary paradigm, feminist perspectives on sustainable development have tended to emerge out of critiques of existing understandings to move toward alternative, more gender-sensitive conceptions of sustainability. In addition to presenting these alternative feminist visions, a significant portion of the following discussion involves critical interrogation of non-feminist literature on sustainability and sustainable development. Consistent with most feminist discussions of sustainability, the paper casts a skeptical eye toward a popular buzzword in environmental scholarship that not only seems imprecise, but that also appears to suffer from an absence of feminist concerns. A critical understanding of what happens when feminist concerns are left out of movements for social transformation provides a compelling rationale for engagement in this timely and urgent issue.

The literature upon which this paper is based comes from English-speaking countries, primarily from the sociological North (i.e., North America, Western Europe and Australia), although a number of Southern sources are included as well. The focus is on scholarly discussions of sustainability in the developed world, because this is the context with which the author is most familiar. As there is a substantial body of literature on women’s analyses and experiences of ecological crisis and sustainable development planning in the gender and development field, it would be neither desirable nor appropriate to conflate both sets of perspectives in one paper. In addition, the paper draws almost exclusively from academic literature that has been based on

social and political theory as opposed to popular or technocratic sources (i.e., governmental documents) which feminist theorists have not generally been involved in preparing.

The article begins with a brief account of the historical development of feminist concerns about the state of the natural environment. The second part of the discussion explains the dominant feminist conceptual frameworks for interrogating the concept of sustainability and provides a theoretical basis for understanding the connections between feminism and environmentalism by examining the common principles of feminist environmentalism or *ecofeminism*. This leads into the third section which highlights the implications of theoretical blind spots in conventional (or non-feminist) approaches to sustainable development. By examining the gaps in these approaches to sustainability and comparing these to feminist concerns, the aim of the paper is to work toward a more inclusive and gender-sensitive definition of sustainability.

## **2. Why Should Feminists Have Anything to Say about Sustainability?**

At first glance, some might wonder why feminists should care to engage in discussion over a concept that is at best highly contestable and that at worst can be quite conservative. Sustainability has become so much a slogan of the environmental movement in recent years that it is arguably hollow, having dealt inadequately with questions like “What is to be sustained?” and “For whom and for how long?” If one takes the literal definition of the verb “to sustain,” meaning to endure for a long period, then it might be objected that feminism is about transformative process toward an egalitarian and non-oppressive world rather than about keeping things the way they are forever. Why should we want to sustain the kind of world that has been so brutal and unjust to well over half the population? More significantly, discussions of sustainability seem to end up with value-laden and totalizing visions of how the world ought to be (along with the people in it) that seem to contradict feminist concerns for diversity and context-dependency. Such visions also run the risk of implying that it is in the interests of *humanity in general* to work toward sustainability, when many have rightly pointed out that “we are most certainly not all in this together.”

In response to these concerns, and to provide support for the development of feminist perspectives on sustainability, the following points ought to be considered. First, despite the various conceptual flaws in the idea of sustainability, it would be unwise for feminists to abstain from an ongoing discussion that is gaining such theoretical and political momentum. Insofar as the concept has the potential to engender progressive political action, it is worth retaining it and working towards a more comprehensive, gender-sensitive meaning. It does not necessarily mean that feminists should try to have the last word on sustainability, but rather to critically examine its multiple dimensions and bring in those that have been left out. This argument points to the need to expand the meaning of sustainability from a narrow focus on the ecological limits to growth or long-range viability of institutions to include issues of social and environmental justice, inter- and intra-generational equity, ideology, and political practice. This is the subject of part two of the paper.

Second, it should be clear that feminists have an *a priori* stake in embracing and developing a gender-sensitive definition of sustainability. Feminism has always been a critical-visionary perspective concerned with understanding problems in the present context in order to envision a brighter future for all. Central to feminist epistemology is the belief that no theory is complete without an analysis of patriarchy, women's oppression, and gender inequality. Feminist scholarship since at least the 1970s has been asserting the need for research into women's lives not only to ameliorate women's exclusion from knowledge production but also because it is believed that women experience the world in qualitatively different ways from men, due to their socially and discursively constructed position as Other. Generic approaches that consider humanity in gender undifferentiated terms have been shown to be implicitly masculine. To this we must add the argument that ostensibly generic approaches tend, in reality, to be quite race-, class-, culturally- and historically-specific.

Analyses of the ecological crisis and their corresponding solutions in the form of sustainability agendas are no different. As many feminists have discovered, and as will be demonstrated below, conventional discussions of sustainability are primarily oriented toward the needs and interests of white affluent men living in Northern capitalist contexts. Insofar as women, in general, experience the ecological crisis differently than men, a feminist analysis is important in the search for sustainable alternatives. So far, this analysis remains at the margins of environmental discourse and policy-making. It is therefore necessary that feminist scholars engage in this discourse in order to ensure a balanced, diverse and workable program of change that is based on an analysis of differences rather than patriarchal universals.

Third, there is the realization on the part of growing numbers of feminists that the quest for gender justice and equitable social transformation takes place in the midst of an ecological crisis that threatens all life on the planet. This raises new questions of priorities as well as strategy. As Canadian feminist sociologist Margrit Eichler writes: "...if our survival on this planet is, indeed, threatened...what help will social justice be to us as we lie gasping for a clean breath of air on our devastated earth? Is it worth continuing to do feminist work given the immediacy and overriding importance of environmental issues?" It is now necessary to evaluate social and political goals on the basis of their implications for the environment. This has been the case for many different fields of inquiry and action: the ecological crisis of unsustainability has changed the terms and goals of the debate. For example, for feminists, gender equity can no longer mean an equal right to pollute or the achievement of levels of consumption equal to affluent men. And in the process of putting feminist struggles in a global environmental context, it also becomes necessary to engage in broader discussions about, and to learn from, other perspectives on sustainability. Some feminists have recently suggested that it is important to find ways of collaborating with other social movement groups -- to find a new politics -- for the sake of planetary survival.

As urgent as the ecological crisis may be, however, it is clear that feminists have been quite reluctant to renounce feminist goals for purely environmental ones. Why is this the case? Perhaps the most important reason is that many feminists have uncovered and chosen instead to explore the connections between women's subordination to men and

the exploitation of nature in modern industrial societies. These connections have been the subject of study for feminist environmentalists who engage in discussion of sustainability. It is to this branch of feminist discourse that the paper now turns.

### **3. Connecting Feminism and Environmentalism**

It is difficult to provide an overview of feminist environmental (also called ecofeminist) perspectives on any topic without getting caught up in internal debates and controversies. In fact, one might argue that the tendency among ecofeminists toward protracted inward-looking debates has provided ample fuel for their critics and taken their attention away from the issues that dominate discussion in the mainstream environmental movement. For example, some will take exception to the use, interchangeably, of ecofeminism and feminist environmentalism, and there is an argument for distinguishing between “First World” feminist and post-colonial feminist perspectives on environmental and other political issues. In an effort to avoid the temptation to get involved in this debate, however, this article will focus on some of the common themes that are relevant to discussions of sustainability, all the while acknowledging that ecofeminism is a discourse with multiple voices rather than a unified perspective.

#### **3.1. Historical Background**

Historical antecedents of modern feminist environmental perspectives in industrial countries are many. For example, in response to the negative impacts of industrialization and urbanization, visions of ideal communities and living spaces were developed by feminist utopian writers in the nineteenth century. These visions often included the integration of natural and built environments, collective delivery of support services, and egalitarian relationships between the sexes. Perhaps most relevant to discussion of sustainable development today is the work of early material feminists in the progressive era who worked to improve the unhealthy environments in industrial American cities.

Ellen Swallow, an American water chemist and the first female instructor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) is credited (by some) with founding the science of ecology in the 1870s. Her work at MIT was devoted to demonstrating the connections between daily domestic and working life and environmental conditions. She argued that because women were intimately acquainted with the care and use of basic resources like water and food as well as their byproducts (sewage and air pollution), they were the ones who needed to be educated and entrusted with environmental management. The field of domestic science -- or home economics -- has its origins in some of the same concerns as the present day movement for sustainable development (the word “ecology” comes from the Greek word *oikos* meaning household). Often called “municipal housekeeping,” women’s advocacy of sanitation programs, urban beautification projects, and immigrant settlement houses inspired by Swallow and others was instrumental to the establishment of an environmental and social justice ethos that underpins modern professions like city planning. It is well known that urban planners and policy-makers are now actively involved in sustainable development initiatives worldwide.

The contemporary linkage of feminism and environmentalism in the West is attributed to French feminist writer and activist Françoise d'Eaubonne who coined the term *écoféminisme* in 1974. In her article titled *A Time for Ecofeminism*, d'Eaubonne explained that this new global movement within feminism draws upon the specifically feminine power to combat the ecological crisis and the systems of male dominance that have given rise to it. Not only are women more morally outraged than men by the scale of environmental destruction -- brought about by overpopulation and resource exhaustion - - but, in her view, because they give birth to new generations, they are more aware of what needs to be done to ensure the possibility of a future for them to inhabit. Writing at a time of intense fear about the so-called population bomb, d'Eaubonne was most interested in the relationship between women's freedom to control their fertility and ecological impacts of over-population. Like many radical feminists in the late 1960s she asserted that women have a fundamental right to reproductive freedom, but took the argument a step further to argue that if women had control of their fertility (through unlimited access to abortion and contraception) there simply would not be a population problem. It was her contention that male power over women is to blame for over-population and, by extension, the over-consumption of natural resources. So, for her, the solution to the ecological crisis -- to the impending destruction of the planet -- was the revolutionary overthrow of masculine power and the institution of the Feminine, bringing with it the absence of all forms of power and the flourishing of life.

While d'Eaubonne's rhetoric would seem rather inflammatory in contemporary circles, one aspect of her argument that remains relevant to this day is that, insofar as they remain dominated by men, progressive social and environmental movements tend to neglect issues of gender inequality and women's right to self-determination. Women became aware of this problem in the late 1960s when it was evident that their status and the division of labor within environmental organizations were consistent with those in the wider patriarchal culture. Activist women began to understand the complex relationship between gender and environmental goals when it was clear that groups could fight for ecological conservation while exploiting the unpaid labor of women at the same time. As a result, they began to form their own organizations that combined the political goals of feminism and those of the environmental movement. To this day, there are many feminist environmental groups, while women in traditional green organizations continue to battle internal sexism. Recent studies in the United States and Britain have found that while women make up the majority of volunteers in organizations like the World Wildlife Fund and Greenpeace, men hold most of the paid management and leadership positions.

Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, ecofeminism has split into a number of subdivisions based on different theoretical perspectives on women's relationship to nature and the root causes of the oppression of each. Feminist historian Carolyn Merchant lists the dominant strains as i) *liberal ecofeminism*, which takes an equality of opportunity approach to social and environmental change (that this author believes exists primarily as a negative label given to women in environmental policy positions who do not go far enough in their analyses or actions); ii) *socialist ecofeminism* which blends Marxist theoretical analyses with analyses of the links between women and nature; iii) *social ecofeminism* which follows American anarchist Murray Bookchin's philosophy of social ecology; and iv) *cultural ecofeminism* which eschews masculine

modifiers and is based instead on women's innate connections to the earth and natural processes of life. To this might be added *spiritual ecofeminism* which looks at goddess religions and women's spiritual relationship to the environment, and *postmodern ecofeminism*, a branch which questions not only the validity of the concept of "the environment" but of "women" as well, seeing them as essentially contested social constructs which are representative of historical and cultural conditions. More applied fields of ecofeminism are feminist urban environmental approaches made up of feminist geography and urban planning and feminist ecological economics (to be discussed below).

"Third World" ecofeminism, or what more appropriately may be called a *women, environment and development (WED)* approach, has a different, but related, history and set of concerns. Insofar as feminism is a product of Western/Northern political traditions and struggles, it is debatable whether ecofeminism (strictly speaking) exists at all in developing countries. However there are many examples of women's practices and political mobilizations around environmental concerns in post-colonial and still colonized countries that bear a basic resemblance to ecofeminism, in that vast numbers of women are organized to achieve improved living conditions for themselves and for their communities. Recently, links have been drawn between women's environmental activism in the South and the high levels of women's participation in popular struggles against environmental racism in the United States. Feminist scholars Bina Agarwal and Vandana Shiva, who write about sustainability from a post-colonial feminist perspective, have debated the relative merits of joining forces with Northern ecofeminists. Because this article focuses on feminists' perspectives on sustainability in overdeveloped contexts, the details of this debate will not be given here.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Sherilyn MacGregor** holds a Ph.D in environmental studies from York University, Toronto, Canada and is a SSHRC postdoctoral research fellow in the Institute for Environment, Philosophy and Public Policy at Lancaster University, UK. She does research in the areas of ecofeminist theory and green politics and has been an editor of *Women and Environments International*.