

# What is Ecofeminism?

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The modern capitalist development model, based on technology and economics, insatiably drives us towards competitiveness and the search for unrestrained riches, which stems from the old desire for patriarchal power. This results in a model that at present not only punishes several groups, such as women, but also makes it unsustainable in the long term. Critical ecofeminist theory is a counterpoint to this capitalist and patriarchal model. It argues that, based on the feminist approach, elements such as the EU “precautionary principle”, freedom of choice in motherhood, food sovereignty or environmental education in childhood are the principles that guide society’s actions towards sustainable development.

An easy way to explain ecofeminism is to define it as a meeting between feminism and ecology. Today, ecofeminism is on the rise, mainly among young women, and is gradually leaving behind a long period when it was little known or poorly understood. It was believed that all forms of ecofeminist thought identified women with nature and that they were a kind of biologism.

Observing reality shows us that there are so-called “ecowarriors”, women like Berta Cáceres, murdered in 2016, who risk their lives to defend the environment and others who ignore or detest environmentalism. However, the terms “women” and “ecology” are not synonyms. Being ecofeminist does not imply that women are innately more linked to nature and life than men. There are men who devote themselves to defending the environment and/or animals and women who are indifferent or hostile to these new forms of awareness. However, it is true that, statistically, at an international level, women are the majority in the environmental movements and in the defence of animals.

From a constructivist perspective of gender subjectivity, we can consider that women’s interest in caring for nature is not an automatic mechanism related to gender. Reality presents us with a wide range of individuals but also trends linked to the socialisation of determined tasks and attitudes. In general, women have not historically had access to weapons and have traditionally been responsible for taking care of the most vulnerable (children, the elderly and the sick) and maintaining the domestic material infrastructure (kitchen, clothes, etc.), developing, in statistical terms, a “relational” subjectivity, attentive to others and expressing greater affection. When these characteristics are complemented with appropriate information and a critical approach to hegemonic discourses, the conditions emerge to awaken their interest in the defence of nature and other living beings.

Twentieth-first century environmental and social conditions require that feminism and environmentalism play a key role. On the one hand, women have attained self-awareness and have set about overcoming the barriers that for

centuries have been raised against their full inclusion in the field of paid work, culture and politics. Their achievement of emancipation goals can be delayed through diverse strategies but it will be impossible to impede it in the long term. On the other, the unsustainability of the techno-economic development model is becoming increasingly clear, as it has a destructive nature that compromises the future of humankind.

Due to climate change, the misnamed “natural” catastrophes no longer affect only geographical areas traditionally known for their extreme climate phenomena, ravaged by hurricanes, floods or draughts. Now there are tropical storms in New York. Today, the four seasons of the temperate climes have been altered all over the world. Developed countries and hubs of world economic and political power are also experiencing the perverse side of their unsustainable enrichment, which will hopefully make people more aware.

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We are witnessing the chronicle of a death foretold: that of nature. The media continues to play down the seriousness of environmental deterioration, always trying to complement the news of unusual climate conditions with a reference to something similar that occurred in the distant past. This hinders the view that we are already facing dangerous global climate change brought about by an irresponsible techno-economic model. There is no doubt that we are experiencing what some time ago the German sociologist Ulrich Beck called the “risk society”. Pollution, pesticides, herbicides,

genetically-modified food, preservatives... the list is very long. Today, only economic interests, ignorance or the adoption of a blind techno-enthusiast attitude can prevent us from clearly seeing the manifestations of the ecological crisis. For many people, far too many, environmentalism continues to be the unwanted guest, the party-pooper, the enemy... There is an unconscious and generalised desire not to want to know, fostered by the immense montage of the consumer society. However, the reality that is increasingly firmly knocking on our doors now shows that the environmentalism warnings of past decades were true.

As several UN world conferences and reports by numerous NGOs point out, women are the first victims of environmental deterioration but also play a key role in the defence of nature. Ecofeminism is the thought and praxis that addresses this double-sided issue.

As for the mutual impregnation between feminism and environmentalism, some experiences of women activists from ecologist parties and organisations in several countries show that strong patriarchal inertias persist in them, as in the rest of society. Environmentalism is not always feminist (Puleo, 2015). In its turn, in general, feminism does not show great ecological sensitivity. Feminism and environmentalism are still, to a great extent, two worlds with their backs to each other. Ecofeminism is the theory and praxis that has committed to coming together with the conviction that dialogue will enrich both.

## What is Ecofeminism?

After years of reading and reflection on feminist and ecologist theory, I have shaped a proposal that I have called *critical ecofeminism* (Puleo, 2011). It is the result of my search for an ecofeminist theory that can elude the dangers that renouncing the legacy of Modernity



Woman gathering olives in Greece (IEMed Collection).

entails for women. It is clear that all ecofeminisms are “critical” insofar as they criticise the current system but I have chosen this adjective as a reference to the commitment to fulfilling the promises of liberty, equality and solidarity of the Enlightenment and their relation with the new millennium challenges.

The development process of Modernity has ambiguities and multiple sides and not all of them are desirable. The principles and convictions of liberty and equality have been accompanied with new forms of oppression and exploitation. However, it can be argued that the criticism of prejudice and the idea of equality of all human beings have been decisive in the unstoppable emergence of numerous emancipation movements and inevitably in the emergence of women’s demands. Today we can speak of over two centuries of feminist theory

and praxis. In the last four decades, neofeminism has shown an extraordinary multiplicity of interests and theoretical frameworks and has managed to meet the challenges of different emerging debates with innovative proposals and fertile analyses that could not have been produced from a perspective blind to gender inequality. The class, race and gender diversity approaches, theories on the subject, ethics and political philosophy have been notably enriched by a current of thought that gives a voice to women in an unusual boost to emancipation.

In its techno-scientific side, modern rationality has brought us great levels of welfare but, at present, we are discovering that it has also brought about a hitherto unseen destruction of the fabric of life that sustains us, as well as threats to the global ecosystem unsuspected until quite recently (Riechmann, 2016). Hence

the development of environmental ethics as a crisis cabinet faced with what, in the field of thought, has been defined as the death of nature, according to the eloquent title of the book by Carolyn Merchant (1981). Moreover, as reduced rationality of the *homo oeconomicus*, it has established new forms of exploitation and inequality.

*Ecofeminism: an attempt to outline a new utopian horizon, addressing the environmental issue from the categories of patriarchy, androcentrism, care, sexism and gender*

In terms of themed environmental problems, feminist thought already has a long history. For more than three decades it has accepted the challenge of reflecting on ecological crises through its own codes. The result has been the appearance of ecofeminism: an attempt to outline a new utopian horizon, addressing the environmental issue from the categories of patriarchy, androcentrism, care, sexism and gender. From its women thinkers, I have found original and highly suggestive reflections on the technological civilisation in which we live. All of them shed light on different aspects of what we can call, to allude to a classic of the hermeneutics of suspicion, a malaise in culture and nature. From my own personal and intellectual coordinates in dialogue and conflict with theirs, I have produced an ecofeminist approach that avoids calling on essentialist definitions of gender difference characteristic of the so-called “classic” female authors. Neither is it a spiritualist, Christian or neo-pagan ecofeminism for which the component of faith is necessary, something that one possesses or not, regardless of will. My proposal conserves the enlightened legacy of equality and autonomy while asserting the strong meaning of “eco”; in other words, it is not reduced to a mere anthropocentric feminist environmentalism in which

relations with nature are limited to proposing good management of “resources”. The aim is to think and think of ourselves with another approach in the urgency of the times of climate change without backtracking on the path laid by feminism or abandoning the foundations that have enabled us to advance along it.

The emphasis on the identity of the woman as a mother linked to the Earth that we find in some forms of ecofeminism can involve a regression with respect to the feminist principle of motherhood as a free and personal choice. Calling for equality and self-empowerment involves promoting sexual and reproductive rights. Faced with a vague exaltation of life that hides the traditional refusal to give sexual self-empowerment to women, the critical ecofeminism I propose advocates free determination over your own body. It is important to remember that the text in which for the first time the term ecofeminism was used was an article by Françoise d’Eaubonne published in 1974 that argued that the overpopulation of the planet, an issue of concern for ecologists, was the result of the patriarchal refusal of women’s right to decide on their own bodies. This idea has been weakened in later ecofeminist developments. Theoreticians such as María Mies (1998) even reject any technological resource as they consider it an element of domination of capitalist patriarchy. They thus return to the image of women defined by their role as mothers. Moreover, some forms of environmentalism are currently promoting an essentialist and antifeminist discourse that will probably reactivate women’s justified fear of environmentalism. On behalf of a supposed feminine nature, they call on women to give up their studies and paid work and return exclusively to taking care of children (*The Ecologist para España y Latinoamérica* no. 48). This is very negative both for women and for environmentalism. I argue that, midway between the irresponsible nihilist hedonism



lacking socially-spirited goals and the return to the sacralisation of the biological processes there is an alternative: the ecological awareness that preserves its full autonomy. The future of ecofeminism involves a clear stance in favour of women's access to free decision-making on reproduction. Women must be recognised as subjects with decision-making power in demographic matters; in other words, subjects with their own life that choose if they will have children or not and, if so, when and how many to give birth to in the framework of an ecological culture of equality. This requires, on some occasions, the participation of scientific knowledge and technology.

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I am not calling for a return to an idealised natural past or to put blind faith in science and technology. Critical ecofeminism is not technophobic or technomaniacal. It will require the effective fulfilment of the precautionary principle adopted by the European Union in 2002 and currently threatened by the signing of international free trade treaties such as CETA. According to the precautionary principle, when there is scientific uncertainty with regard to the risk of the irreversible harm that a new activity or product might entail for the environment or health, the principle of prudence will prevail. Thanks to the precautionary principle, it is not necessary to have conclusively shown its harmful nature to take control and preventative measures. The burden of proof falls on those who seek to introduce the new product or activity, not those potentially affected. Faced

with the aims of those who prioritise gains over risks, the precautionary principle proposes transparency and democratic participation in the debate.

For an ecofeminism of materialist foundations, the problem of the technoscientific modifications of nature does not lie in the alteration of a sacred order but in the rudimentary and coarse character of current human intervention in complex systemic adaptations with a past of millions of years. Faced with the advance of what we can call "technomania", a blind faith in technology as a magical solution for everything, we must clearly understand that technology cannot be a new idol before which we prostrate ourselves, renouncing critical thought. The "collateral damage" and the possible irreversibility of the changes introduced make us examine innovations in the light of Human Rights – particularly the right to health in a healthy environment –, biodiversity, the suffering of other human beings and the legacy we are leaving to future generations. One of the reasons why ecology has become a feminist issue is that pollution has a particular effect on the health of women and on reproductive health. Among its effects there is the growing incidence of Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS, erroneously and routinely diagnosed as an allergy), chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia and the increase in breast cancer (Valls-Llobet, 2015).

We must attain the self-awareness of belonging to the fabric of the multiple and multiform life of the planet where we live. We must understand that its destruction is, in the mid or long term, ours. The technology that creates problems instead of solving them, that seeks to take possession of nature to turn it into a slave and a mere object to be bought and sold, is *hybris*, irrational excess, the worst of the defects for classical antiquity thinkers.

No known culture is perfect, but all can improve with intercultural learning. We must

learn from the interculturalism of the whole of Latin America. Faced with an extreme multiculturalism that beatifies any practice provided it is rooted in tradition, intercultural learning enables us to compare, criticise and criticise ourselves. We must learn from sustainable cultures as an opportune corrective to our suicidal civilisation but without falling into sanctimonious admiration. We must also be able to recognise something particular of ourselves to offer to others. The aim is to construct an ecological culture of equality together rather than to revere any custom just because it is part of the cultural tradition, ours or other's. All cultures have been and are unfair to women and non-human animals. The minimal comparison criteria I propose for the mutual intercultural assistance of ecofeminism are sustainability, human rights, with special attention to women's rights as they are the most ignored across cultures, and the treatment of animals.

Faced with neoliberal globalisation, critical ecofeminism calls for ecojustice and sonority. We must be clear that if feminism wants to maintain its internationalist vocation, it must also think in environmentalist terms, because poor women of the so-called "South" are the first victims of the destruction of the environment aimed at producing sumptuary objects sold in the developed world. The standard of living in rich countries is not exportable to the whole planet. Natural resources are consumed without taking into account the possibility or impossibility of their renewal. Pillaging is limitless in those countries where the population lacks the political and economic power to face the destruction of their environment. Thus, for instance, the elegant teak furniture that proliferates in the furniture shops of northern countries is generally what remains of the Indonesian forests, systematically ravaged. As Vandana Shiva (1995) has rightly noted, rural women in India living in a subsistence economy have seen their quality of life tragi-

cally diminished with the arrival of "rational" exploitation aimed at the international market. If in the past they had wood next to the village, now they must walk many miles to find it. This is the modernisation that reaches them. If in the name of justice we think that the whole of humankind must have access to a decent life, this development model must change and become sustainable. Food sovereignty and agroecology have proven to be excellent travel mates of ecofeminism in the construction of this new model that not only deals with environmental balance but empowers women in their daily lives.

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The ecological and social problems of our time demand the analysis and condemnation of the economic interests involved in environmental devastation. But criticism of gender identities is also necessary if we want a profound ethical political transformation that goes beyond rational management of resources. It will be necessary to reveal the androcentrism that makes the male (*andros*) the measure of all values. Androcentrism is a key concept to understand the ideology of dominion. The androcentric slant of culture comes from the extreme historical bipolarisation of the social roles of women and men. In the patriarchal organisation, the harshness and lack of empathy of the warrior and the hunter became the most valued while the attitudes of affection and compassion related to the daily tasks of caring for life were exclusively assigned to women and strongly underestimated. In the modern capitalist world, under the insatiable search for money and the omnipresent discourse of

competitiveness, the old desire for patriarchal power beats on. Hence a critical approach to gender stereotypes is also necessary to achieve a culture of sustainability. It is not about falling into essentialisms or a discourse of praise that makes women the self-denying saviours of the ecosystem but recognising as extremely valuable the capacities and attitudes of empathy and attentive care, to also teach them from childhood to males and apply them beyond our species, to animals – enslaved and exterminated on an unprecedented scale – and to the Earth as a whole (Velasco Sesma, 2017). The criticism of the neoliberal development model based on market competitiveness that exploits and oppresses must also have a gender perspective.

It is time to demand, teach and share attitudes, roles and virtues, because praising the virtues of care without this praise for a critical approach that condemns power relations finally ends in a sweetened and inane discourse. The universalisation of ecological and post-gender ethics of care is a pending issue in daily life. Much of women's emancipation has rested on industrialisation, on packaged or "disposable" items, harmful to the environment. If we have not envisaged equality in care, how will we organise the sustainable daily infrastructure without sacrificing the still uncertain spaces of women's freedom? This universalisation of the ecological and post-gender ethics of care is a pending issue in the whole of education. We can say that prevailing environmental education still does not give enough visibility to women or provide a critical awareness of gender roles. Neither does it particularly favour the emergence of emphatic feelings with regard to the natural world. Here, the reason/emotion dualism, which has a long patriarchal history, operates. It can be said that, except on rare occasions, the developments of environmental education do not pass critical ecofeminist examination. We need a reconceptualisation of the human being that integrates reason

and emotion, an extended moral feeling and an ethics of responsibility in keeping with the new technological power of the species.

We can no longer call on providential guides. Neither religion nor philosophy offers us valid technological alibis to go on destroying our world. We discovered long ago our insignificance in the infinitude of the cosmos. In the universe disenchanted with science, technology and philosophy, only an emphatic approach to humans and non-humans can rescue us from nihilism. Since Darwin, the theory of evolution has shown us our close kinship with non-human animals, that tortured and massacred Other despite being able to enjoy, love and suffer. Ecofeminism can help us understand this brotherhood and act in consequence.

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I will therefore conclude these lines with a call to perform our task under the motto "Liberty, equality and sustainability". From our post-metaphysical present, in these times of economic and ecological crisis, of emergence of fundamentalisms of diverse kinds, of reaction and regression with respect to the social conquests that have cost those who have preceded us so dearly, these three concepts express the core of the conviction that another world is possible and, to get closer to this horizon, we must tirelessly build an ecological culture of equality.

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