

## FEMINIST ECOLOGICAL ECONOMICS

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### Summary

Feminist ecological economics is about the fundamental connections between the problems of economic injustice towards women, ecological degradation, social unraveling in both North and South, global economic inequities and unstable political and environmental systems worldwide. Because markets cannot function or exist outside of social and natural contexts which are often undervalued, undertheorized and misunderstood, the links among services provided “for free” are crucial to any notion of sustainability. Feminist ecological economic models view the economy as a complex of individual, family, community, and other interrelationships which each have economic and ecological significance. The essence of a feminist ecological economics approach to understanding economic relationships involves four principles:

First, household and community production and reproduction must be the CENTER of economic focus, because without human beings and the society they live in, the ‘economy’ has no meaning. Feminist ecological economics takes as a starting point the unpaid work which is vitally necessary to build and maintain homes, human relationships, and communities -- and without which there is no "economy".

Second, the precise form of interrelationships between the economy and nature is crucially important. Not only is industrial exploitation of nature different from the more benign interactions implied in small-scale agriculture and household cultivation; the very same product can be made using a range of techniques with different ecological

impacts. Appropriateness of production techniques for their social and ecological context is a prime value.

A third theme in feminist ecological economics is respect for the time and effort it takes to be “green”. The work of creating sustainable economies, to the extent that it falls unequally on women and men, may be unsustainable. Both production and reproduction take time; technology cannot do away with the time natural reproduction takes, which is an important link between human societies/economies and the natural world. Even when technology speeds up production, this happens at a cost, and technology cannot substitute for the basic and essential value which comes from nature.

The fourth major theme is that of community activism and engagement in the process of social change. Because of its insights about the importance of communal and social processes, respect for diverse ways of knowing and valuing things, and methodological pluralism, feminist ecological economics implies working with other people to transform unsustainable economic systems.

This article provides an overview of feminist ecological economics, with special attention to three particular aspects: its theoretical foundations and relation to other schools of thought, its implications for activism and public policy, and directions for future research work.

## **1. Introduction**

Feminist ecological economics is about the fundamental connections between the problems of economic injustice towards women, ecological degradation, social unraveling in both North and South, global economic inequities, and unstable political and environmental systems worldwide. Because markets cannot function or exist outside of social and natural contexts which are often undervalued, undertheorized and misunderstood, the links among services provided “for free” are crucial to any notion of sustainability.

Feminist ecological economic models view the economy as a complex of individual, family, community, and other interrelationships which each have economic and ecological significance. Absolutely central to feminist ecological economics -- like most feminist economics in general -- is the primacy of the work which takes place in households and communities. This article provides an overview of feminist ecological economics, with special attention to three particular aspects: its theoretical foundations and relation to other schools of thought, its implications for activism and public policy, and directions for future research work.

The next section of this article discusses the theoretical foundations and heritage of feminist ecological economics, relating it to long-standing bodies of literature. Section three outlines the fabric of feminist ecological economics as it is now appearing, in the form of a review of recent theoretical work. Section four gives examples of feminist ecological economics in action and discusses its “policy relevance”, addressing in particular the relationship between global and local economic change. Research needs implied by feminist ecological economics are surveyed in section five, and the final

section of the paper sums up and concludes.

## **2. Theoretical Foundations of Feminist Ecological Economics**

### **2.1. Ecological Economics**

The ecological critique of neoclassical economics has many dimensions. Economic scale, and how to take account of environmental realities in limiting or shaping the overall scale of the economy, is of primary importance; related to this are the observations that individuals do not always want more of everything, as assumed in the neoclassical principle of non-satiation, and that value itself has many dimensions and is not well-measured by money, in many cases. The fact that neoclassical economics treats most environmental factors (such as pollution, biodiversity, and forest preservation) as “externalities”, because there are no markets in which their prices can be set, simply underscores the inadequacy of neoclassical theory for dealing with economy-environment interactions -- and these are increasingly critical in importance.

Ecological economists point out that much of what has been termed “economic development” has simply meant monetizing -- creating markets for, cutting down, digging up and/or selling -- natural and human capital which was formerly not part of the market system. A more holistic concept of development would include some measure of efficiency in resource use, maximizing the use-value of natural capital for the human economy as well as the equity of its distribution, both inter-generationally and intra-generationally. Multiple scales for measuring value, respect for social and natural diversity, concern with ethics and justice, methodological pluralism, and an evolutionary approach to understanding economic change flow from this more humble outlook on human-environment interactions.

Central pillars of ecological economics which are relevant for feminist ecological economics are a concern with economic scale and how to constrain it; redefining economic efficiency and value; seeking insights in natural science theory and pluralistic/interdisciplinary approaches; and immediate policy relevance given the global importance of ecological limits on economic growth.

### **2.2. Feminist Economics**

The feminist critique of neoclassical economics centers on whose economics is FOR and what it is ABOUT. Models of markets in which each individual makes choices based on his or her own self-interest, and tries to maximize his or her own utility, are ludicrous given the many cross-cutting factors people consider when deciding things like whether to look for or take a job, and how to spend their money. Everyone, and particularly most women, because of gender roles and interpersonal relationships which spread individuals’ responsibilities both within and across generations, considers much more than their own individual situation in making economic decisions. Rather than being about consumer choice, economics should be redefined as being about “provisioning”, or how society is or might be organized to meet people’s needs and wants -- and thus, to reproduce itself. Cooperative action is central to how economies work.

Feminist scholars have critiqued the idea of “objectivity,” in the positivist scientific sense, and feminist economists argue for more pluralism in theory and more analysis of the way hierarchical and dualistic thought patterns constrain people’s understanding of complex economic processes. For feminist economists who are modelers, this does NOT mean that simplification and abstract modeling is impossible or counterproductive, just that models need to acknowledge their assumptions, be flexible, fairly sophisticated, and allow for cross-influences and interactions among variables.

Household production, human and social reproduction, and “free” transfers of goods and services are outside the scope of neoclassical economics, unless they are somehow assigned dollar values. Unlike environmental factors, they are often not even regarded as “externalities”! So valuation of the under- or non-valued -- both “how” and “whether” -- is an important issue in feminist economic thought, just as it is in ecological economics.

Economists in the South have contributed to the feminist critique of neoclassical theory by emphasizing its inadequacies to explain the systemic effects -- and especially the effects for women -- of economic “development”, industrialization, structural adjustment, and the Green Revolution. Again, this is because neoclassical models often leave out important economic variables -- especially those involving key factors of production and interpersonal relationships -- and make faulty assumptions about people’s motivations for economic decisions.

Feminists have also pointed out that it is not just neoclassical theory which is fairly blind to women’s reality and to less-gendered ways of thinking -- socialists have also tended to regard feminist ideas as “utopian, not scientific,” and to scorn or downplay the importance of human and social reproduction.

To sum up: feminist economics emphasizes the interrelatedness of economic actors, the importance of family and community in individual and social reproduction, the centrality of non-monetized and usually unmeasured work, and therefore the need for relatively complex, nonhierarchical and nuanced models which do not pretend to be universal, and for basic empirical research to supply the data necessary to use these models.

### **2.3. Ecofeminism**

Another influence on feminist ecological economics comes from ecofeminism, in all its myriad forms. Ecofeminism is the position that there are important connections between how one treats women, people of color, and the underclass on one hand and how one treats the nonhuman natural environment on the other. The term, coined as long ago as the early 1970s, is employed in a huge and complex literature, and has inspired much hope and political creativity. The elaboration of debates on whether women are “essentially” closer to nature than men or not, and on the ethics and spirituality of human relationships with the non-human world, are very valuable in clarifying the gendered nature of women’s economic roles as well.

Several themes in the literature of ecofeminism are particularly compelling in relation to

feminist ecological economics. First, a number of writers have discussed the importance of acknowledging and valuing women’s work and its absolute necessity, like that of inputs from the natural environment, for the continuation of economic processes. What capitalism terms “productivity” is largely the extraction, exploitation, and appropriation of the non-wage labor of women. The hierarchical dualisms rooted in Western philosophy situate men’s activity, which is named work, as “cultural” and important, while women’s activity is called “natural”, subsumed into men’s production, and valued only individually and instrumentally. As an alternative, ecofeminist analysis explores the process of valuing as a product of community discourse.

Much feminist theoretical work is relevant to such collective approaches to economic issues, which rest on values such as co-operation, empathy and nurture stemming from a relational, nonhierarchical view of the world; a focus on process rather than end results; the belief that social change begins with personal transformation; and attention to intuition, subjectivity, creativity and spontaneity.

#### **2.4. Political Ecology and Green Socialism**

Political ecology deals with both the global and the local implications of ecological change, and how these effects are mediated internationally. It involves tracing global and North-South linkages of domination which undergird the environmentally-destructive status quo. Feminist political ecology contributes detailed analysis of identities, differences, and power relations. The political ecology focus on grassroots action and bottom-up political change is an important contribution to feminist ecological economics.

Green socialists relate ecological social and political transformation to current and historical social movements as they attempt to theorize what a “sustainable” alternative to capitalism would look like. Women’s roles and responsibilities in building these alternatives are increasingly discussed in this literature. Green political theorists and policy analysts discuss the generalities and specifics of institutional transformation. The environmental justice movement shows the possibilities inherent in environmental organizing across differences. Community development activists develop and describe grassroots strategies for locally-specific economic transformation. All of these literatures contain elements that are relevant for feminist ecological economics.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Patricia E. (Ellie) Perkins** is associate professor in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University, Toronto, Canada. Her teaching and research focus on ecological economics, gender, local economies, and community economic development. She has written and edited a number of articles and special issues of journals on the subject of feminist ecological economics, including a special issue of *Ecological Economics* (vol. 20, no. 2, February, 1997), a special issue of *Women and Environments International* (no. 54/55, Spring 2002), and a special issue of *Feminist Economics*. She holds a Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Toronto.