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What is the Practical Significance of the Relation between Gender Equality and Ecological Balance?¹

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Abstract

Nowadays it is indisputable that climate change is a global phenomenon. On the one hand, there have recently been ever-increasing efforts by the international non-governmental institutions (NGOs), including the European Union (EU), to combat climate change either through mitigation or adaptation methods or both. On the other hand, the whole “planet rescue package” is integrated within a “greener” capitalist system, from the governance of which the environmental damages actually originate as a result of the maximum possible capital accumulation at the expense of the weaker. Climate change is thus involved in a vicious circle and produces as well as maintains social discriminations. Gender inequality as a form of social discriminations is therefore involved in the same vicious circle of the neoliberal way of addressing societal problems. Recognizing the great spectrum of analyzing climate change policy within a political structure, namely capitalism, only the connection between the devastating dominance of the human over nature and the still existing marginalization of women in the modern era will be elaborated. The aim of this paper is therefore to outline and analyze the basic framework of the eco-feminist movement about the interrelated environmental degradation and the underestimation towards women, as the feminine gender symbolizes nature.

Keywords: ecology; feminism; eco-feminism; capitalism; gender inequalities; climate change.

Introduction

In 1960s John Lennon has been singing “woman is the negro of the world” in order to indicate a parallelism between the suppression due to different color or race and the one due to different gender. This artistic expression among others indicates that woman is confronted with gender discriminations contained in sovereignty dipoles, such as the dipoles between black and white, production and reproduction, human and nature, speech and body. The gender dipole and its symbolical role are the subject of critical review by the movement of eco-feminism (Plumwood, 1992:10). The term “ecofeminism” appeared for the first time in 1974 in the scripts of Françoise d’Eaubonne, a French feminist, who encouraged women towards an ecological revolution in order to save the planet. In 1980s this term turned into a movement at the same time with the developing «green movement» and the massive antiwar and antinuclear demonstrations. The term eco-feminism has been therefore

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developed as the need to find out ways through which feminism and environmentalism could be combined in order to promote the respect towards women and the natural world. The primary idea is that there is a long historical precedent of relevance between women and nature that led to their suppression (Miles, 2020). The analysis of this idea seeks to shed light on the main challenges of its practical implementation in order to achieve social equity. Hence the paper is structured as follows: it starts with the development of the methodological steps of this research, then analyzes briefly the background of gender symbolization along the centuries and the practical significance of eco-feminism in the current developed and underdeveloped world. Lastly, it draws some conclusions and comes shortly to policy recommendations.

Methodology

Methodologically, this paper draws on a range of different sources such as books, articles in academic journals and environmental reports, with a view to providing an outline of a whole universal trend. It should be mentioned that due to the fact that eco-feminism has a lot of different sub-divisions, only the necessary common grounds of the movement will be analyzed in order to draw conclusions relevant to the topic.

Historical Background

Nature has been depicted in many ancient cultures as a mother nurturer on veils and statutes and has been honored as such. The move from nature to technology, from conservation to production and from matriarchy to patriarchy was signaled by the rural revolution, as Engels describes in his book “The origins of the Family, Private Property and the State” (Engels, 1992). On a socioeconomic level, the result was that nature and women were turned from nurturers’ symbols to production means, while on a symbolical level the animistic polytheistic religions were substituted by male monotheistic ones. During the Enlightenment period (18th century), the neoteristic idea of the rational control over the natural and social environment was established as a means for prosperity. The resulting dualism in turn enhanced the hierarchy between dipoles of controlling and being controlled, which is still dominant in the Western culture (Plumwood, 1992:12). Moreover, on the 19th century, it shall be noted that the woman is depicted as the wild nature that needs to be tamed. As a result, gender identities are being established and reproduced. As Riane Eisler mentions in her book “The Chalice and the Blade” the root of the problem lies within a social system where the blade is being established as an ideological tool according to which the male nature is connected with violence and dominance (Eisler, 1988: 46).

Women in the world today

As seen above, production and reproduction are connected with the dipole male and female. For example children's care as an emotional process is connected with the female and is considered easier compared to education and sciences that are part of the production and are therefore superior and connected with the male. Female is considered as not productive and needs the intervention of the male to become so. As an ecofeminist activist, Vandana Shiva, mentions "a clear and alive river is not a natural resource, but must be developed through dams to become productive" (Shiva, 1988:4). In that context the female body is seen as an object of expropriation and colonization as the nature (Karen, 2000:26).

The symbolical colonization is materialized through the colonization of the "underdeveloped" world in Asia, Africa and Latin America (Karen, 2000:31), where women are even more vulnerable due to the differences in the living standards, job opportunities and education level comparatively to the "developed" countries. Whereas the 1951 Refugee Convention does not include the category of climate refugees, it stresses that climate change exacerbates existing inequalities and that women are among the most affected by climate change; underlines that people in rural areas in developing countries, in particular women, are especially vulnerable, as they are often dependent on natural resources, do much of the agricultural work, particularly in food production and collecting water and fuel for the family and are very often responsible for the bulk of unpaid work in households and communities; underlines that agriculture is directly linked to environmental conditions; emphasizes that women, being in the frontline, are the first to face injustice and poverty (European Parliament, 2017). Statistically, women have less access in the economic resources and less property rights, as they possess less than 1% of the global resources and represent 70% of the population that earns less than 1 \$/per day contrary to the necessity for more opportunities to shape decisions and influence policy, as has been officially recognized since the 13th Conference of Parties on climate change (COP 13) held in Bali in 2007. They are also sub-represented systematically on a political and financial level, as they represent 17% of the Members of the Parliament and 8% of the Ministers. In addition, they carry out a big part of the world's non-paid work that mainly corresponds to children's/elderly care and housekeeping. It is quite alarming that women are occupied for about the two thirds of the hours worked internationally and receive only 10% of the global income. They are also the main victims of sexual harassment; they represent 80% of the refugees and displaced people and in case of natural disasters their fatality is quintuple compared to men. Additionally, women have special health needs mostly concerning reproduction and due to impediments posed by culture, tradition or societies, the equity of rights and obligations between men and women is rebutted (European Parliament, 2012).

Gender perspective & environmental policy on a legal basis

However, there is an attempt that the international conventions consider the vulnerability of women. The Hyogo Action Plan 2005 about the natural disasters, points out the significance of the gender dimension in climate; namely Article 13d sets that “a gender perspective should be integrated into all risk disaster risk management policies [...] early warning, information management, and education and training” (Hyogo Action Plan, 2005).

Historically, Agenda 21 and Rio Declaration have included multiple provisions that consider gender discriminations and promote the embodiment of women in climate politics. Indicatively, Principle 21 of the Rio Declaration mentions that “Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable development.” The international community has endorsed several plans of action and conventions for the full, equal and beneficial integration of women in all development activities; in particular the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women emphasize women's participation in national and international ecosystem management and control of environment degradation. Several conventions, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (General Assembly resolution 34/180, annex) and conventions of ILO and UNESCO, have also been adopted to end gender-based discrimination and ensure women access to land and other resources, education and safe and equal employment. Also relevant are the older 1990 World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children and the Plan of Action for implementing the Declaration (A/45/625, annex). The effective implementation of these programs will depend on the active involvement of women in economic and political decision-making and will be critical to the successful implementation of Agenda 21 (UNCED, 1992).

The EU perspective

The role of women as protagonists of the climate change in individual and communal level is obvious. Either women immigrants become “green” ambassadors in Denmark or Indians create traditional agricultural associations. Despite the increased consciousness, the gender dimension is included only in the European programs and plans related to climate policy and in the financial growth in favor of the developing countries but is absent from any EU climate policy. Specifically, the Energy Roadmap 2050 that sets the EU priorities for a green transition does not take into consideration the prejudice concerning the roles between men and women disregarding the fact that the main green energy domains, such as agriculture, are dominated by men, which has a practical significance in the opportunities offered by both genders as for the education and the business logic as well as the wages

differences or the jobs' differentiation into scientific places and office jobs. Lastly, it is not only a matter of climate justice but also an issue of effectiveness, as women represent half of the population (European Parliament, 2012).

Conclusions

This paper aimed to provide an overview of the eco-feminist trend, which dates back but is still timely all over the world as the basis to eliminate gender disparities and natural disasters. The goal besides is not the reversal of dualism in the benefit of women, as traditional feminism supported, which would just legalize patriarchy. The aim is the complete deconstruction for both genders and the reconstruction of the natural and social identity of the human being through non-hierarchy and non-dominance. Nevertheless, the fact that this view of fighting against the environmental exploitation is not universally accepted, should not deter the long-term struggle of all the people to protect the planet. Hence, the planet has certainly its own rights primarily not to be polluted and the respect towards it, is the obligation of anyone regardless of any gender.

Policy recommendations

The application of an effective policy of equity between both genders in crucial domains, such as transportation, energy, agriculture is inseparable from a fair not only EU but also international climate policy. Therefore, the consciousness itself of the gender inequity contains a two-fold action: the provision of social welfare in order to reverse the man-made vulnerability and the embodiment of women in climate politics in order to achieve the maximum independency and liberation (European Parliament, 2017). This is strongly confirmed by the 4th Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2007, which defines that the impact of climate change varies according to gender, age and class, with the poor being most likely to suffer the most. All in all, achieving gender equality is a key to human development, environmental conservation and in the fight against poverty (European Parliament, 2012).

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