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‘Accelerating the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls by addressing poverty and strengthening institutions and financing with a gender perspective’

Expert Group Meeting

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Feminist Political Ecology

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Feminist Political Ecology

My contribution to this session on advancing feminist alternatives is to propose how feminist political ecology and a focus on care can help us to analyze the current economic, environmental, and geo-political crises to form alternative frameworks that move away from a reliance on extractive economic growth, addressing inequalities, redistribution of wealth and reprioritization of ways of living together to achieve sustainable development. In the following, I underline the importance of 'Earthcare' for human, more-than-humans and the planet, and how the feminist political ecology (FPE) foregrounds multiple ways of knowing and being about nature and culture as alternatives to dominant, economic development trajectories (Harcourt and Nelson, 2015; Elmhirst, 2018).

Alternatives are needed to the mainstream approach that relies on extractive economic growth. What we know from the research of the last decades that alternatives exist. We need to address today's multiple crises through a shift in development thinking and practice from universalizing truths to pluriversal learnings from the knowledge of women and men's place-based strategies of resilience and survival (Kaul et al., 2022). Building on this multiplicity of knowledges moves us from universal understandings of economic growth which neglects the importance of care and the environment to pluriversal understandings of how care is central to economic and environmental resilience. It is important that policy has the courage to take stock of our current environmental crises and unsettled geo-politics and listen to voices that have been marginalized and made peripheral.

FPE in listening to those voices around the world offers new narratives and tools that question neoliberal economic development and technocratic fixes to gender inequalities and the climate crisis (Resurrección, 2017). It looks instead at how the current crises are part and parcel of historical and systemic inequalities that proffer a universal story instead of recognizing the many stories that create our many worlds in one world. FPE shows that there are thousands of alternatives to the mainstream story of economic development that should be part of transformative policy. These narratives refute the idea of scarcity, and the need for financialization of the environment by illustrating how in everyday lives in communities around the world it is possible to care, respect and exist with the environment without resorting to unsustainable resource extraction of nature and people. FPE aims to use the knowledge of these many narratives of sustainable livelihoods to push back the idea of scarcity and financialization of the environment.

Feminist Political Ecology

FPE has provided powerful tools that show how environmental 'crises', and human-environment relations are determined by power, gender, class, race, ethnicity, caste and specific socio-economic, cultural and historical legacies. FPE emerges from a gendered critical analysis of environmental science, environmental rights, consumption and distribution of resources, learning from peoples' interactions with the environment. It looks at how gender power relations determine access and control of resources across scales shaped by interactions with ecological, technological, and political-economic processes. It points to gender inequalities leading to reduced rights for women to own land, gain access to energy, water and sanitation facilities all of which have a negative impact on human health, the environment and sustainable development.

There is now a considerable body of knowledge, thousands of case studies and field reports on the gendered economically and socially-differentiated impacts of environmental change. These studies show how considerations of gender and environment are crucial to our ability to achieve a just and sustainable future and argue that it is important to bring gender-environment knowledge into mainstream analytical and policy development frameworks.

Bringing gender-environment knowledge to transformative policy and actions needs to occur on several levels which I present in the following 10 points.

1. Question scientific objectivity

We need to boldly expose the so-called objective approach to environmental problems by viewing human/ environmental relations as part of the ideologies and economies of domination, inequity, exploitation and colonialism (Haraway, 1988). By looking at environmental relationships through the lens of gendered social relationships, and in the context of colonial histories and human economic activities, we become aware of how environmental challenges and policy responses are not gender-neutral, and that social justice or equity analyses cannot be seen as secondary or trivial to identifying and solving environmental problems (Harcourt and Nelson, 2015; Elmhirst, 2018).

2. Understand intrahousehold dynamics in relation to gender and environment

We need to recognise that gender-environment relationships operate on different scales beginning with understanding the ways intra-household dynamics determine access to resources, resource use, conservation, consumption, and the ways in which men and women interact with the environment (Bauhardt, 2014; Di Chiro, 2019).

3. Ensure gender-environmental issues are understood at the macro level

At the larger scale, we need to understand how gender-environment relations are embedded in inequitable histories that continue to erase women's bodies, voices and knowledge of the environment. Recentring the importance of gender relations and the environment in policy includes directly acknowledging that gender – environment relations have to inform 'big' problem-solving save the planet endeavours.

The climate crisis is an outcome of the unequal power relations and the loss of cultures, natures and ways of being that is impacting the planet. The extractive model of economics development is exploitative of people and nature and is profoundly racist, patriarchal and classist based on deep historical inequities.

4. Recognize how coloniality shapes development processes today

An important hurdle to overcome is to expose how development processes are built on colonial histories. This requires feminists to acknowledge the dispossession and the devaluing of life and look to forge policies that are anti colonial and anti extractivist. We need to go beyond the mainstream discourse that climate change can be addressed through smart technology, the green economy, and universal agreements such as the SDGs. Not only because it perpetuates development myths, erasing histories and cultures, but also because, as Donna Haraway (2016) states, it 'saps our capacity for imagining and caring for other worlds', and for 'recuperating pasts, presents, and futures'.

5. Bring the politics of care to the policy table

FPE argues as part of this reimagining our lifeworlds which recentres gender and environmental relations requires us to bring care to the center of equity and development, as we work towards repair and amplify solidarity not reproduce mastery. Caring is an ethically and politically charged practice (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). There is substantive political work to do to overcome intersectional oppressions that are leading to gender inequality, poverty and the destruction of our Earth. Bringing the politics of care to the table we can disrupt gender injustices and colonial continuities that shape access to resources and inequality. Valuing care exposes the deep gendered injustices particularly for communities exposed and displaced by climate change and environmental destruction in the majority world.

On one level, care is a deeply gendered and time-consuming activity performed to support the bodily, emotional, and relational integrity of human (and more than human) beings, but in a more profound sense, care is an ethical and political concept that recognises that care is everything we do to maintain,

continue and repair our world. In this deeper vision of care, to value care is to recognise our mutual interdependency and our need for sustainable and flourishing relations not merely survivalist or instrumentalist ones (Dengler et al., 2021).

6. Promote and practice a feminist ethics of care

FPE promotes a feminist ethics of care as part of reimagining a post-capitalist alternative to neoliberal forms of natural resource-based development. Maria Puig de la Bella Casa (2017) argues that a refocus on care asks us to change our views on virtually everything: of ontology, epistemology, ethics and politics. Following this position, we need to find ways to promote and practice community, relationship building, and care for the planet and for each other. A caring economy that acknowledges gender/environmental relations has to be embedded in the principles of cooperation, sharing, reciprocity, and intersectional environmental justice. Instead of ‘greening’ the economy we need to be ‘sustaining livelihoods’ to ensure nutrition, ecological balance, clean water, secure housing, gender equality, meaningful approaches to all forms of labour (Di Chiro, 2019).

7. Understand how care as central to new economic thinking

In order to move towards economic and social justice, it is important to elevate this capacity to care in economic thinking. There is an expanding literature by ecological economists, degrowth scholars, political ecologists and critical development scholars who argue for the need to harness the creativity of human potential to reduce harm and promote a flourishing biosphere while at the same time acknowledge extractivism, lack of sustainability and the limits of resource use. Care and the ethics of care are part of this increasingly loud and urgent call for new ways of knowing (Tronto, 2010).

8. Promote Earthcare as an every day politics necessary for regeneration and flourishing

This is where FPE, and specifically the concept of Earthcare (Merchant 1995; Barca 2020), can contribute to the discussion. Earthcare is about the everyday politics of securing the conditions for the regeneration and flourishing of our own and future generations. In her book *Forces of Reproduction*, Stefania Barca’s theorising on Earthcare comes from her observations of the Praialta Piranha, an agroforestry settlement in the Brazilian Amazon. She looks at how local people survive by continuing to care for the Earth and each other, even in the midst of their struggles against the attacks on their land and culture by Bolsonaro’s government. She argues that they continue to thrive in their territory because of the relevance and value they afford to care work, not only in the home but also for the land and non-human environment (Harcourt et al., 2023). If we are to deal with climate crisis we see the importance of Earthcare labour — care for the soil, water, non-human animals and plants — and learn from the indigenous experiences of land/body/territory being fundamental to social reproduction, which includes relations with the environment. Miriam Lang (2021) a researcher working in Ecuador, adds to this analysis of Earthcare in her study of the Kichwa ethic of *sumak kawsay* of Cayambe county, Ecuador. The first indigenous kayambi mayor of Cayambe has revived the *sumak kawsay* practices of assembly-based decision-making, collective labour and collective land titles and indigenous gender relations. She describes how community care includes care for the local ecosystems, especially soil fertility and water sources. Putting into practice *kichwa* care ethics has strengthened collaboration and reciprocity between humans and nature, created more resilient ecosystems and transformed interpersonal relations in Cayambe, which has led to greater intergenerational, intercultural and interepistemic justice (p. 1296).

9. Learn from how communities in the majority and minority world are collectively putting into practice Earthcare

The question is how to learn from these contextually specific examples of Earthcare and amplify such visions in a new economy based on community care for others and nature (Gibson-Graham 2008). Earthcare is about ‘caring with’ others. It requires communities to put into practice an ethics of care. Earthcare is a vital and visible act that holds communities together and requires social recognition and

economic resources. A new economic thinking needs to reclaim care as solidarity and as a collective practice that can also value care for neglected and damaged ecologies (Arora et al., 2020 p. 248). It is already happening now, feminist economists in Chile are making visible diverse communities' visions of care, including Earthcare, and are negotiating to bring them into state policy. There is a lively debate on social reproduction in Chilean public policy analysis based on the ethics of care presented by feminist networks emphasising the importance of community relations of care for sustaining livelihoods (Bravo Arias, 2022).

As we acknowledge and learn from inspiring Earthcare practices in rural and indigenous Latin America, we can also see practices of care and solidarity in the minority world. Convivial caring relations among people and their environments can be found in urban municipalities and rural areas. This micropolitics of care happens in established neighbourhoods and communities, as well as in marginal out of the way places such as abandoned buildings, factories, parks and farms, which form the ruins of the neoliberal restructuring of both cities and rural areas. Environmental activists occupy and reclaim these spaces, cleaning, repairing and making them inhabitable and productive spaces (Kaul et al., 2022).

For example, Zechner's *Commoning Care & Collective Power* (2021) describes childcare commons in Barcelona as another example of micropolitics of care; the network of mothers and commons nurseries illustrating how feminist commons of care can function in modern cities. Other examples of community care in urban spaces can be seen in recycling and repair shops, local flea markets, community kitchens distributing locally grown produce and outdated food from supermarkets, the selling of artisanal products and the provision of community fitness classes in parks. These caring community practices are what make communities thrive; they build on the time given, skills and a shared vision of wellbeing. Collective caring is a complex practice that involves intentional engagement with other bodies and worlds in ongoing relationships. It is visceral, material and emotional, linking selves, communities, natural and social worlds (Dengler et al., 2021). Learning from feminist theory and practice, collective care is based on understanding connections that recognise the work of social reproduction and the intersectionality of gender, race, class, ablebodiedness, and age (Harcourt and Bauhardt, 2018). It is about collective survival within a world where many lives are more precarious than others. It is about solidarity and collaboration, where caring is an ethically and politically charged practice.

10. Work together to institutionalize and revalue care as a strategy for planetary survival

Feminist thinking and action concerning relations of care are important if we are to transition to an economically and socially just society. By placing care at the centre of economics, society and our relations with the environment, we can move towards positive ways to achieve planetary survival. This is why the sharing of small stories of possibility is important. Stories can produce tangible evidence of why care matters, and the importance of valuing care as an ethical and political practice (Tronto, 2010). Institutionalizing an ethics of care involves challenging priorities of economic productivism, high levels of consumerism, and market competition which have commodified care in modern societies. Instead, we can learn and draw inspiration from caring communities, where critical kin relations foster social and ecological interdependence, and respectful and sustainable relationships are nurtured between humans and non-humans. These communities reproduce themselves and non-human beings, engaging in Earthcare to protect and maintain the varied ecologies that they inhabit (Harcourt et al., 2023).

Valuing care exposes the deep gendered injustices particularly for communities exposed and displaced by climate change and environmental destruction in the Global South. Care should be seen as core aspect of safeguarding planetary well-being, or socioecological reproduction (Barca, 2020).

In a recent book *Contours of Feminist Political Ecology* (2023) I edited with members of an EU funded Horizon 2020 ITN project we record conversations with activists and scholars who challenge the inherent violence of a fossil-based economy that drives capitalist accumulation leading to climate change and deepening social and economic inequalities at local and global levels. The book details the experiences of radical ecological democracy movements around the world to show how relations of care constitute the material and physical processes that sustain ecosystems and human and more-than-

human living worlds (Harcourt et al., 2023). The challenge is now to bring that knowledge, experience and wisdom to the policy tables.

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