

INTRODUCTION

Women, Ecology and Economics:
New Models and Theories

Ellie Perkins

Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, North York, Ontario, Canada

In envisioning a special issue of this journal which would focus on the connections between women, ecology and economics, our initial goal was to provide a forum for discussion around very concrete examples of why women are (and should be!) concerned with ecological economics. Flowing from my initial discussions with several colleagues and students, who all thought such a forum was a great idea and long overdue, a number of specific suggestions emerged.

The Call for Papers mentioned such possible topics as “The parallels between women’s work, environmental services and natural resource use with regard to valuation, status as ‘externalities,’ sustainability, complementarity with financial capital, incorporation in national accounts, etc.; the role of women in creating the conditions for sustainable economies and sustainable trade; women’s health as an environmental and economic issue; the economic implications of women’s position as environmental stewards, especially in the South; and the impact of globalization on women, from an ecological economics perspective.” The journal’s editors suggested an additional topic of interest which we listed as ‘women and population policy.’

In response to this Call for Papers, we received submissions from all over the world, many more than we could print. While some of the papers do emphasize the concrete connections between women and ecology in economics, many go far beyond this specific approach to sketch out a radical new vision

for all of economics, grounded in women’s reality. Thus, in both quantity and scope of submissions, we got far more than we expected!

Moreover, the degree of complementarity and balance in the work of authors from all over the globe is astounding. While the models differ somewhat in emphasis and form, all those we received take 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’.¹ Whether her paper is theoretical or empirical, however, each author chooses a unique focus for her inquiry, tracing different ecological connections.

Maren Jochimsen and Ulrike Knobloch, for example, develop a three-part model of economic activity which relates the ‘maintenance economy,’ of ecological processes, as well as the social and physical relations which are indispensable for human existence (and which are carried out without payment of money), to the industrial economy.

Hilkka Pietila’s model consists of three concentric

¹ This emphasis on what Julie Nelson calls ‘provisioning’, Vandana Shiva calls ‘sustenance’, and Maren Jochimsen and Ulrike Knobloch call ‘caring activities’, is a central theme of much feminist economic work. See, for example, Ferber and Nelson (1993), Folbre (1994), Kuiper and Sap (1995), Bakker (1994), MacDonald (1995), Day (1995), Waring (1988), Elson (1993), Perkins (1996), Shiva (1988).

circles with the 'free' household/community economy at the center. She discusses the implications of this model in terms of the need to preserve skills and know-how for household production, allow time for household activities and reduce time spent in outside work, organize communities spatially to reflect the centrality of home life, and adopt the new, critical perspective on economic growth which flows from the model.

Teresa Brennan reworks Marx's value-theory to create a theory of time and speed in which nature is the ultimate source of value. She focuses on the time natural reproduction takes in underscoring a vital connection between humans and 'nature'.

Time also provides a central theme for Mary Mellor. She points out the distinction between social (or 'clock') time and natural/biological time, emphasizing the different roles of women and men in relation to each, and the importance of learning to live in 'biological time'.

Using specific examples from India, Vandana Shiva illustrates the feedbacks between women's local grassroots organizing around environmental issues, and theoretical understanding of these issues at the global level.

Julie Nelson highlights the contributions of feminist writers who are moving away from hierarchical and dualistic models of the relation between humans and nature, discussing how these insights are useful in ecological economics.

Martha McMahon demonstrates the partiality of neoclassical economic formulations, and the ways in which the market and 'economic man' are dependent on hidden transfers from nature and unpaid work.

Sabine O'Hara integrates ideas from feminist economics and ecological economics into a theory of production which emphasizes the social and biophysical context within which production takes place — its 'sustaining services'. She argues that actually making production sustainable requires a shift from the abstract to the materially concrete.

So we have, in effect, come full circle — by requesting specific details on the connections among women, ecology and economics, we have brought together papers which provide that and more: the

seed of a new theoretical vision of an economy which is socially and ecologically sustainable. Applying this vision, however, involves much more than theory; detailed familiarity with specific people and places is vital.²

The crux of building better economies lies in the interplay between theory and practical work, as demonstrated in many different ways by the contributors to this issue.

References

- Bakker, I., ed., 1994. *The Strategic Silence: Gender and Economic Policy*. Zed Press, London.
- Day, T., 1995. Symp. on Feminist Economics: Introduction. *Can. J. Econ.*, 28: 139–142.
- Elson, D., 1993. Gender-aware analysis and development economics. *J. Int. Dev.*, 5: 237–247.
- Epstein, B., 1993. Eco-feminism and grass-roots environmentalism in the United States. In: ed. R. Hofrichter, *Toxic Struggles*. New Society Publishers, Philadelphia, PA/Gabriola Island, BC.
- Ferber, M. and Nelson, J., eds., 1993. *Beyond Economic Man*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Folbre, N., 1994. *Who Pays for the Kids? Gender and the Structures of Constraint*. Routledge, London/New York, NY.
- Hypatia, 1991. Special Issue on Ecological Feminism, Vol. 6(1).
- Kuiper, E. and Sap, J., eds., 1995. *Out of the Margin: Feminist Perspectives on Economics*. Routledge, London/New York, NY.
- MacDonald, M., 1995. *Feminist Economics: From Theory to Research*. *Can. J. Econ.*, 28: 159–176.
- Merchant, C., 1992. *Radical Ecology*. Routledge, London/New York.
- Merchant, C., 1995. *Earthcare: Women and the Environment*. Routledge, New York, NY.
- Mies, M. and Shiva, V., 1993. *Ecofeminism*. Zed Books, London.
- Perkins, E., 1996. *Limiting Trade Through Community Building*. *Alternatives J.*
- Shiva, V., 1988. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development*. Zed Books, London.
- Waring, M., 1988. *If Women Counted*. Harper-Collins, San Francisco, CA.

² Much ecofeminist work stresses the importance of diversity, a sense of 'place', and the evolution of location- and community-specific 'partnership ethics' (to use Carolyn Merchant's term). See, for example, Merchant (1992, 1995), Epstein (1993), *Hypatia* (1991), Mies and Shiva (1993).