Examining the Gendered Dimensions of Food Security: An Ecofeminist Perspective
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Viewing statistics on food inequality, one is struck by several paradoxes. Why is it that women make up a majority of the food insecure when they also make up a majority of food producers? Why do women, who often take on the duty of feeding the family, own less than two percent of land worldwide? One theory, that of ecofeminism, attempts to answer these questions in a theory based in patriarchy, oppression, and dominance of both females and the natural environment. Rooted in older philosophies, ecofeminism has broad implications and explanations of current real-world situations.

Food Security is a Gendered Issue

Statistics illustrating food inequality are staggering. Farms headed by females produce much less compared to their male counterparts, for reasons that are largely avoidable. Women often lack access to entitlements and other social privileges needed to improve their agricultural output. These same forces restrict women’s access to food for those who do not farm for subsistence. In societies in which females traditionally take the role of feeding the family, the gendered effects are more broadly seen (Young, 2012). According to E.M. Young (2012), “Access to a decent diet is largely determined by political, economic, and social processes, and gender relations are always structured by these forces at all scales from the global to the local” (p. 293). As many women rely on the natural environment for survival, environmental loss harms not only ecosystems but also women whose livelihoods and family’s food security are reliant on such processes.

One way to explain the disparities in food security is to connect gendered food inequality with environmental degradation using the lens of ecofeminism. Ecofeminism is concerned with issues relating to both women and nature, focusing on interconnections between the two. This theory may illuminate the origins of certain inequalities, explain current biases, and even serve as a rallying movement motivating women to act against injustice. With a combination of feminist and environmental concerns, ecofeminism can help elucidate some of the issues women currently face in food security.

Foundations of Ecofeminism

A link between feminism and environmentalism goes back to the long held connection between women and nature. Our current bias, while based on ancient traditions, is evident in the language we use to describe women and nature. As the ecofeminist Karen Warren points, we call nature “mother nature,” seeing “her” as “fertile” and not, for instance, “potent.” Animals, an intrinsic part of nature, also are commonly connected with femininity. There are a multitude of animal names used to describe women, compared to the relatively few for men (Warren, 2000, p. 27). This creates an unconscious cycle of association between females and nature, each reinforcing the other and perpetuating this link to the exclusion of men. This effectively degrades
women, as our society views animals as inferior to humans. When we “animalize” women, Warren argues, we are supporting their position of inferiority in society.

The inferior status of both women and nature can be traced as far back as ancient Greek philosophy. This philosophy, the foundation of modern Western thought, was particularly patriarchal and anthropocentric. Aristotle constructed a famous hierarchy of being that determined the superiority of God by categorizing the world into four levels of importance. The inanimate and immobile objects existing in nature formed the lowest level, which included objects such as minerals and plants. This level was followed by animals, which possessed mobility but limited mental faculties. The level above this consisted of men, whose rational capability distinguished them from mere nature. The ultimate level comprised God, considered the most rational of all beings. Interestingly, women did not have the same placement in the category as men, but in the lower category with nature. Women were believed to possess intellectual abilities lesser than those of men. Women were associated with the body, while men were associated with the mind, hence the identification of god with the masculine (White, 2004). This fusion of the feminine and the natural was artificially dichotomized with the masculine and rational, creating a man/nature and male/female divide. Hierarchy of nature contributed to hierarchy within human society—a hierarchy that prioritized men over women.

With the advent of the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution, humans began to replace God as the primary source of reason and knowledge. We see that people were not as vested in the traditional religious teachings as in the past. Previously, they only had ideas of the gods to explain nature and all of life. This led to animistic traditions that worshiped nature and the gods believed to control it. But when people developed scientifically informed explanations of how, for instance, crops grew best at some times and not at others, they began to rely on their own ability and reasoning to respond to and change their natural environments. Through using human reason they gained the idea that the unpredictability of nature could be controlled, and attempted to dominate and conquer nature for their own benefit. Traditional religious institutions replaced individuals as legitimate possessors of reasoning, and thus knowledge, as human reasoning was exalted due to the Scientific Revolution and its advancements resulting from human capabilities.

**Current Implications of Conquering Nature**

In *Stolen Harvest*, Vandana Shiva writes of modern methods of conquering nature, such as seed patenting. She gives specific details of this trend of patenting seeds, and essentially, of patenting life. For instance, Monsanto has genetically engineered seeds designed to resist pesticides, increase yield, and create a uniform crop (Shiva, 2000). As with Enlightenment thinking, by using reason in conjunction with the scientific process, humans attempted to overcome the unpredictability and diversity of nature. The stress on crop uniformity is forcing nature to fit a predictable pattern. By artificially creating crops that suit our needs, Monsanto and other companies have eased fear of the unpredictable.
In doing so, however, our outlook of nature and life became one of dominance. Seeds became commodities that humans can exploit and adapt for their benefit, but seeds produce life and sustain the world’s food supply (Shiva, 2000). Monsanto has patented seeds could eventually dominate food production, just as they have dominated nature.

This approach to the natural environment and our food supply is one based on dominance, through the conquering and patenting of nature. Aristotle’s sense of natural hierarchy is evident here. If humans are elevated above nature on the hierarchy, they can use their rational abilities to overcome what they view as deficiencies in nature. They can then exploit these to their benefit. The idea that humans can create and control plants is the result of a purely patriarchal thinking that devalues nature and women alike.

**Scientific Reasoning and the Divide between Men and Women**

Science was relegated to the masculine. Women were not considered to be as rational as men, since they were thought to be ruled by their emotions. This rendered women as unobjective, irrational thinkers, and therefore unfit to pursue the scientific process and that ultimately led to the possession of knowledge (White, 2004). This mentality was a recipe for the oppression of both women and nature. With the recognition that humans are not at the mercy of the gods, humans saw their ability to conquer nature and tailor it to not only their needs, but also to their desires. Terms such as “rational,” “scientific,” and “objective” claim to be impartial, and reachable through a purely logical thought process. However, by positing itself as objective, this type of scientific thinking barred thinkers from other traditions, namely women. As women experienced exclusion, they associated themselves with the nature that man sought to dominate.

Vandana Shiva comments that at this point traditional feminine knowledge was, by society standards, disregarded. This includes both inherent knowledge, such as that of childbearing, and knowledge assigned due to gender roles, such as working in the home. Women were not regarded as legitimate possessors of knowledge, replaced by male experts, and traditional female spheres of work were marginalized. “Old wives’ tales” contrasted with the “expert knowledge” of those who used so-called objective and rational scientific methods to reach their conclusions (Shiva, 1988). This mentality, criticized by ecofeminist philosophers such as Maria Mies, is still evident today.

**Economic Implications**

The foundational assumption of women as irrational has severe repercussions on what types of jobs women can hold, how much they can earn, and how far they can advance due to the devaluing of women’s reasoning abilities and therefore the devaluing of what has traditionally been women’s work. Feminine knowledge, and by extension “women’s work,” has generally been associated with the realm of natural processes and “motherly instincts” such as nurturing and caring for a family (Mies, 2005). Because it is considered natural, not requiring the use of reason, it is often undervalued. Attempting to illustrate the connection between this mentality and the economic implications for
women, Mies discusses an aspect of ecofeminism focused on our view of commodities and value of certain professions. Her perspective allows us to examine the ways in which traditional feminine work became devalued over its masculine counterpart. To illustrate her point, she focuses on subsistence labor, which consists of jobs done primarily in and around the home. This includes, for instance, household chores, maintaining a family farm, collecting water, cooking meals, and other daily necessities (Mies, 2005). These are tasks that many times fall to women.

Economics follows the tradition of devaluing women’s work and therefore shows a bias in its assessments, as it neglects to factor in a key part of our economic system. We fail to consider work done in the home, traditionally by women, as part of the economy and therefore of value. For instance, why is this type of subsistence labor not counted toward GDP? Here we can see the bias of male work as more valuable than work done by females. This type of subsistence labor is not seen as labor in an economic sense because it is not paid and not outside of the home. There is no payment because of the assumption that this role will be the responsibility of women, while the responsibility of men is to work outside of the home and earn money. In fact, Mies notes, without this subsistence labor we could not have paid labor. Because of the devaluation of work that women do, society largely fails to recognize the significant economic contributions women make.

Shiva proposes that this type of subsistence labor is productive until it somehow developed the use of reason and science. Our views of nature are similar. A river, where women may wash clothes, may not be as productive until it is “developed” by building a dam (Shiva, 1988). Developing nature is simply a euphemism for conquering it. In doing so, we restrict nature’s access from women who rely on it for basic subsistence needs. **Women’s Contribution to Food Security**

The economic hindrances women face have implications for the broader society too, as women’s ability to sustain their livelihoods is central to the food security of entire communities. The consequences of our attitude toward the environment and toward women’s work shows with the treatment of women specifically in the developing world, who tend to encounter the worst of its effects. According to one estimate, women and children constitute sixty percent of the hungry (Young, 2012). These women and children primarily come from developing nations, and their situation results from a multitude of social factors, as E.M. Young describes in *Food and Development*.

The significant impact of many women on the food access and welfare of families has led Shiva to state, “Women produce and reproduce life not merely biologically, but also through their social role in providing sustenance” (Shiva, 1988, p. 42). Whereas men work outside of the home to make a living, it is women who attend to the household tasks, such as providing food. This involves making daily diet-related choices for their families and children. As Young states, “Women are the principle food producers across the global south, actually planting, harvesting and processing the food for domestic
production” (Young, 2012, p. 293). Young also points out that government statistics do not reflect this reality, which contributes to women’s contributions being overlooked and reflects the view of subsistence labor discussed by Mies. Young adds that women many times hold this attitude, not viewing domestic chores or farm work as true “work,” and take on these burdens in addition to a “real job” in which they can earn a small income. Because of the added chores of taking care of the family, women are oftentimes unable to effectively fulfill these duties, as their daily workloads are disproportionately heavier than those of men. Women perform numerous roles in the production of food but are not as prevalent in the formal economy (Young, 2012). This distances them from decision-making processes and disempowers them both as workers and as women. Women are therefore not party to political discussions on issues that closely affect them.

Women who work at home face a multitude of problems due to their social conditions, essentially affected by gender, leading Young to conclude, “Many rural women continue to face obstacles that undermine their opportunities for success, such as lack of public and social infrastructure, unequal access to credit, technical equipment and other important resources, such as land and water” (Young, 2012, p. 304). Those who work solely at home are often responsible for maintaining farms and producing crops. However, women oftentimes lack the power and resources to overcome the barriers they face, barriers such as sufficient funding or access to resources. These smaller-scale farms are not producing as much as they could because the women running them tend to lack the purchasing power to acquire effective products and technologies, such as pesticides, farm equipment, and sufficient amounts of seed (Young, 2012). Issues such as the seed patenting discussed by Shiva hinder these women, as seed is central to farmers’ ability to maintain independence and increase agricultural output. Unable to afford seeds, female farmers are at a disadvantage, affecting the food supply of underdeveloped communities. These farms are unable to produce as much as they could. Increasing the agricultural output of female farmers would increase the food security of rural populations.

In addition, women tend to lack social benefits and entitlements such as the right to purchase and inherit property. Young cites the example of a Kenyan woman who farmed jointly with her husband on their property. But the land title was in his name only. After his death, this woman had to fight a trying inheritance battle with her in-laws over the property, and eventually lost her land rights due to the legal system’s biases against women (Young, 2012). These types of cultural restrictions on women as independent landowners and workers limit their ability to produce sufficient food for themselves, let alone for their families. All of these obstacles hinder women in their ability to provide food security for those dependent on them (Young, 2012). Whether due to discrimination, laws, inexperience, or perhaps a combination of these, women are disproportionately growing less food and less independently than their male counterparts.

Women’s independence in these endeavors is crucial, as the hindrances affecting women’s equality affect society. Women are not isolated; they play an essential role in
feeding their families and are therefore essential to ensuring food security in the broader society. Yet without the representation that “real jobs” provide, these women lack a voice in government actions relating to the environment, actions that directly affect their ability to provide food for their families. Excluding this labor from economic analyses serves to marginalize women whose livelihoods became the effect of the policies surrounding economic and environmental changes. Policymakers do not hear the voices of those most affected by ecological issues, and therefore cannot respond accurately to the challenges faced by those working in subsistence labor. As this mostly includes women, it will have consequences for those dependent on these women as well. If a woman becomes ill or is otherwise incapable of working, her family will suffer. If women continue to be barred from certain social privileges, which limit the amount of food they can provide, their communities will suffer.

The Power of Ecofeminism to Overcome Inequalities

Because women are in many places the primary agricultural workers, environmental degradation may harm them directly as it affects their livelihoods. This realization can prompt women to act together to bring about change. The power of ecofeminism lies in its ability to rally women together to fight environmental degradation and seek solutions to social injustices. A multitude of women’s environmental movements initiated in the global south is in recognition of the fact that environmental destruction is directly affecting the livelihoods and well-being of rural women.

In Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development, Shiva describes the Chipko movement of the 1970s. Exploitation continues in the Himalayan region in Northern India due to its resources and natural wealth. Tree felling was particularly common in the area, contributing to several environmental issues such as floods and lack of firewood for locals. As women were the primary agricultural workers, they saw how these actions affected their ability to farm, and therefore feed their families. A group of women began to resist the deforestation, joining hands around trees to prevent them from falling. After a trying defiance, their efforts eventually paid off and the commercial logging ceased. These same women then led the movement to reforest the region and to replace parts of the forest (Shiva, 1988). The success of this non-violent protest illustrated several things, among them, the vested interest women have in the protection of the environment and the power of women to stand up to the authorities to avert ecological crises. Though this group was not limited to women, much of its strength came from acknowledgement of the negative effects logging had on the environment, and thus on women.

In response to the paradoxes brought up in the beginning of this paper, we see that ecofeminist theory is apt to answer such questions. It provides a foundation of Western philosophy that explains our inherited biases, and thinkers such as Shiva and Mies elaborate on the ways in which this thinking harms both women and nature in different, though connected ways. Young illustrates several real-world implications of this bias and
demonstrates the potential of ecofeminism. The ideas this theory posits serve as an effective unifying force for female empowerment over ecological and social oppression, manifesting itself in women’s environmental movements throughout the world. Food security is a multifaceted issue and through the lens of ecofeminism, we can better understand the factors contributing to the issue today.

References


