

Self-care, Care for the Environment, and Care for Others: A Gender Perspective? Cura di sé, dell'ambiente e degli altri, quale prospettiva di genere?

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DOUBLE BLIND PEER REVIEW

ABSTRACT

Care for the environment is one of the key themes in the debate on the concept of care (Mortari, 2022), alongside care for oneself and for others (Orefice, 2020). This contribution offers a reflection on the concept of care from a gender perspective, analyzing phenomena such as the eco gender gap. On one hand, Kuhse (1997) argues that women engage in care more than men because social customs lead them to care for those in need of attention, while Nussbaum (2001) contends that the activity of care is indispensable and that we should base citizenship on it, acknowledging the care needs and the burden of those who provide care.

KEYWORDS

care, pedagogy, eco gender gap, rights, environment
cura, pedagogia, eco gender gap, diritti, ambiente

La cura dell'ambiente è uno dei temi fondamentali all'interno del dibattito sul concetto di cura (Mortari, 2022) oltre alla cura di sé e degli altri (Orefice, 2020). Questo contributo propone una riflessione sul concetto di cura in una prospettiva di genere, analizzando fenomeni come l'eco gender gap. Se da un lato Kuhse (1997) sostiene che le donne si occupino più di cura degli uomini perché sarebbe il costume sociale che le porta a occuparsi di chi ha bisogno di cure, Nussbaum (2000) afferma che l'attività della cura è irrinunciabile e su di essa dovremmo fondare la cittadinanza, dando spazio ai bisogni di cura e all'onere delle persone che se ne occupano.

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1. Ecofeminism, Environmental Care, and Self-Care: A Reflection

In the Perspective of Global Citizenship Education (GCE), the Environment is linked to Fundamental Human Rights and Through this Perspective, the 17 Goals of the 2030 Agenda Have Been Established, Laying the Foundations for Building a Different World and Giving Everyone the Opportunity to Live in an Environmentally, Socially, and Economically Sustainable World. Some of these goals, in my opinion, are interconnected because, on one hand, gender equality and the fight against climate change are two essential goals, while on the other hand, some scientific evidence shows that more and more often, those who take on the responsibility for caring for the environment, the self, and others are women. The term ecofeminism first appeared in 1974 in a paper by the Frenchwoman Françoise d'Eaubonne, *Le féminisme ou la mort*, in which she focused on the environmental costs of "development" and identified women as the agents of change. In Italy, ecofeminism had a significant political impact especially from 1985 onwards, thanks in part to the contributions of many scholars, including Donini, and also following disasters like Chernobyl. The universality and objectivity of hard sciences were questioned because they were "deeply contradicted by their intrinsic gender bias" (Donini, 1990, p. 19), with the exception of stories like that of Katherine Johnson, who in 1960s America challenged racism to work at NASA (Shetterly, 2016). This shift in perspective brought about by women's movements has had significant outcomes in every disciplinary field (Butler, 1990). However, today the reasons behind the environmental movement are more evident, thanks to the devastation caused by climate change and the growing awareness of its causes. Some feminist studies (Marcomin and Cima, 2017) have radically challenged male dominance over nature. Some more recent reflections in the field of pedagogy identify a strong link between violence, patriarchy, and a neoliberal policy tied to development, even at the expense of the environment (Prisco, 2025). A scholar who for many years addressed the themes of environmental care, self-care, and care for the world was philosopher Elena Pulcini, who particularly in her later writings focused on the theme of vulnerability, understood both as a common existential condition and as a perspective from which to build a sustainable future. Francesco Raparelli describes her following her passing in 2021 due to complications from Covid-19: «She, refined and cultured as well as sweet, following Arendt and Weil, the feminism of the ethics of care, but digging 'within and against' the anthropological paradigm of modernity» (Il manifesto, 11/04/2021, (<https://ilmanifesto.it/elena-pulcini-la-filosofa-che-ascoltava-la-vulnerabilita>)). For Pulcini, it is necessary to recover the value of care, freeing it from its traditional negative connotations. This first implies two critical operations: on the one hand, questioning the figure of the sovereign subject (from the Cartesian subject to the homo oeconomicus of the liberal tradition), that is, revealing the one-sidedness of what has been defined as a «disengaged self», a self separated from relationships and contexts, as in the case of the male-patriarchal model; on the other hand, restoring value to the notions of dependence and relationship, freeing them from the connotations of sacrifice and self-denial historically linked to the feminine. To rehabilitate care means, in other words, to imagine a subject capable of combining autonomy and dependence, freedom and relationality, overcoming the dichotomous view that contrasts the priority of the self with that of the other (Pulcini, 2009). As Mortari suggests, even the concept of the self-made man is a symbolic deception (Mortari, 2022, p. 18): there are no people who can build their future alone. Each of us constantly weaves relationships with others, and if one reaches positions of prestige in academia and profession, it is highly likely that someone has taken care of our learning journey and our professional path and has accompanied us along this road. According to Nussbaum (2001), women are often responsible for situations of strong dependence (children, elderly, disabled) because they are more willing to accept part-time jobs or give up careers. The parabola of modern individualism and the sovereign subject has ended up obscuring, or rather eliminating, that fundamental condition of vulnerability which, if recognized, could push the individual to understand their insufficiency and dependence on others, their inevitable link to others, their lives, and their destinies. As Lévinas would say, it is urgent that a «awakening» of the subject take place (1991); and this can only happen through the recovery of the forgotten dimension, which is the first step towards ethical awareness of one's fragility. As Mortari affirms, «[...] the infinity of the other is an infinity of value; the presence of the other is overflowing with value. To welcome the other in its infinity of value means feeling the need to monitor every gesture and every word so that respect is never lacking. The other is inviolable and sacred in their vulnerability» (Mortari, 2022, p. 59). On the other hand, Chiara Bottici, like Pulcini, emphasizes the importance of feminine specificity and proposes an alternative to patriarchal culture, while being mindful of the consequences of a Promethean action. Drawing from Black studies, indigenous culture, queer theory, feminism, and anarchism, Pulcini's student seeks to develop a politics of solidarity in search of a new definition of power and a new terrain that allows us to relate to one another within equality (Bottici 2021, pp. 37, 38). But what are the often unintended consequences of feminism when it is not fully intersectional? When feminists «[...] simply focus on their specific struggles without considering those of others, it can happen that their emancipation comes at the expense of further oppression for less fortunate women, starting with those who most often replace them in reproductive work within the family.» (Bottici 2021, p. 83). In this regard, data concerning caregiving professions today confirm that this sphere remains rooted in the female world, with an example being that in 2022/23, female teachers in

public schools accounted for 81.5%. A small step in the right direction is projects like “Boys in Care” which aim to introduce boys to caregiving professions (such as teaching, nursing, and family assistance), which are too often the exclusive domain of women. This is due to stereotypes and an outdated concept of masculinity that tends to exclude professions considered feminine, and this needs to be overcome if gender equality is to be achieved in our society and to allow everyone to follow their own inclinations and potential. The project, which began with an analysis of the situation in different partner European countries, promoted training courses for teachers and those involved in career guidance at schools, and created initiatives to encourage boys to pursue caregiving professions. On the other hand, the theme of care remained almost entirely unexplored until the 1970s. Until this period, it was a marginal or even absent subject, and only recently have the sciences of education started addressing it. The cause of this absence could be attributed to the fact that it is often «invisible social actors» (Lodini and Luppi, 2011) who take care of it, such as women in healthcare professions and teaching, or migrants in the case of “family assistants” (commonly referred to as caregivers). According to INPS data, in Italy, 35.4% of domestic workers come from Eastern Europe, and 86.4% of domestic workers are women¹. What is clear is that exponents of a «nursing ethics of care» are not putting forward an ethical theory of action, but rather attribute moral significance to psychological attitudes or states which are characterized by an openness and willingness to share experiences, feelings of dedication, and the like. Noddings understanding of «care» as «engrossment» (a putting aside of self, and receptivity and responsiveness to the experiences of others) seems to have a similar basis (Kuhse, 1995). The conclusion reached by J.C. Tronto (1993) on this topic is that care, as a devalued activity, particularly concerns women from disadvantaged classes who perform a service for privileged people who can afford to pay others to take care of them.

2. The Ecological Gender Gap: From Citizenship to Consumption.

As Bruna Bianchi (2012) argues, the ideology that justifies oppression based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and species is the same that sanctions domination over nature. Patriarchy, colonialism, and the exploitation of the planet's resources have always been opposed to the sense of care typical of feminism and decolonial movements. In the context of the «economy of male experience,» as defined by Mary Mellor (2006), the economic man is adult, physically efficient, mobile, free from domestic responsibilities, and detached from the mode of production of the goods or services he consumes, separated from the ecosystem. On the other hand, women's work, reflecting the needs of the body, is rooted in local ecosystems and cannot be detached from its responsibilities. It represents the fundamental reality of human existence (Mellor, 2006). In the context of today's globalized and unequal world, there is a need for an education in global, critical, and political citizenship. In the past two decades, the term Global Citizenship Education (GCE) has rapidly become a much-debated pedagogical concept in academic literature. This is fueled by its inclusion in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is indeed an action program for people, the planet, and prosperity. The term global citizenship education describes an educational approach that responds to the needs of an increasingly globalized, complex, and interconnected world. This type of education is essential to addressing global challenges and focuses on developing an awareness that transcends national borders, promoting individual and collective responsibility for building a fairer and more equitable world (Bamber, 2020). This theme is closely interconnected with the concept of care because addressing future challenges means reflecting on human fragility, the interdependence between people, and the care of relationships in order to regain our true essence (De Vita, 2022). Ecofeminism also leads us to question our perspective on consumption and the fact that men are less likely than women to purchase products and adopt eco-sustainable behaviors. While earlier research attributed this gender gap in sustainable consumption to differences in personality between the sexes, more recent studies (Brough et al., 2016) hypothesize that the gap may also stem, in part, from a prevailing association between green behavior and femininity, along with a corresponding stereotype (supported by both men and women) that green consumers are more feminine. While men tend to be more concerned than women about maintaining gender identity, Brough and others argue that this green-feminine stereotype can motivate men to avoid green behaviors in order to preserve a «macho» image. The concepts of greenness and femininity are cognitively linked, and as a result, consumers who adopt green behaviors are stereotyped by others as more feminine and even perceive themselves as such. Furthermore, men's willingness to adopt green behaviors can be influenced by threatening or affirming their masculinity, as well as by using a green brand with a masculine image rather than a conventional one. Together, these findings connect the literature on identity and environmental sustainability and introduce the notion that, due to the green-feminine stereotype, maintaining gender identity can influence the likelihood of men adopting green behaviors. Previous

1 Cfr. https://www.inps.it/content/dam/inps-site/it/scorporati/comunicati-stampa/2023/06/Allegati/3322_Cs_Convegno-InpsNC_-21062023.pdf (last consultation: 18/03/2025).

research has explained this gender gap in environmental sustainability by exploring the differences in personality traits typically observed in women compared to men. For example, women's concern for the environment has been attributed to their tendency to be more prosocial, altruistic, and empathetic, as highlighted by studies on caregiving professions (Mortari, 2022; Dietz et al., 2002). Women also demonstrate a greater ability to understand others' perspectives and a stronger ethics of care, both of which are linked to environmentalism (Zelezny et al., 2002). Additionally, women may show a greater commitment to the environment because they are more inclined to adopt a future-oriented perspective, known in psychology as prospection memory (Eisler & Eisler, 1994), and are more concerned about health and safety, especially when their children live at home (Davidson & Freudenburg, 1996). There are several reasons why the link between ecology and femininity appears to be cognitively inseparable among both male and female consumers: environmentalism and conservation reflect the care and protection of the environment, which, according to some, are typically feminine traits (Tavris, 1999), and eco-conscious consumers are regarded as more cooperative, altruistic, and ethical compared to their «non-green» counterparts (ibid.). Finally, to the extent that women are actually more ecological than men, this association could simply be the result of the examples that come to mind when thinking about those who typically engage in eco-friendly behaviors. If an association between ecology and femininity is strong enough, it may influence social judgments and self-perception. Therefore, a «green-feminine» stereotype could be supported by consumers of both genders and could affect how individuals perceive themselves and others. Regarding food consumption choices, we can also find a connection between gender and eco-related decisions (Darwish et al., 2024), and this also reflects lifestyle choices in general, as shown by research conducted in 2018 in England by Mintel, the British market intelligence agency; the ecological gender gap shows that 71% of women live more ethically compared to 59% of men².

3. A Commitment to the Present for Future Generations

From various quarters, there has been a call to promote a «care-based thinking,» or systems of life and education capable of preparing individuals to «care for» themselves, others, and the environment that hosts them; it has been recognized that differences should not become asymmetries, so that the other does not appear as foreign and hostile; and it has been defended that fragility is one of the ontological roots of our lives and not a sign of something immature, inconsistent, and devoid of meaning (Orefice, 2020). Despite these commitments, the results, upon closer inspection, do not seem to be as hoped: care remains a suspended image, sometimes subordinated to a naive interpretation, while the very pedagogical discourse, in outlining its foundational framework, has handed over the discourse on care to other disciplines, thereby excluding its own specificity and value. Finally, the sectoral scientific responses produced by the various disciplines, although significant, do not seem to have offered solutions to the economic, social, and cultural damages of our technologically advanced societies (Ibidem). On one hand, the challenge (Lopez, 2007) facing future generations of scholars is to unite in a transdisciplinary perspective to share the ethics of care and ensure it becomes part of global citizenship education (Nussbaum, 2001), making the language of care a universal language, not just a feminine one (Leoncini, 2023). On the other hand, pedagogy must characterize itself as a pedagogy of the margin and discomfort (Demozzi, Ghigi, 2024), addressing delicate and uncomfortable issues for those in power, such as gender inequalities. The shift that has occurred from the 1980s to the present regarding attention to the environment, ecological awareness, and education on respecting nature transforms within schools into teaching children, adolescents, and teenagers the complex interconnections that govern life (Crivellaro, Nardone, 2020), highlighting the network of relationships that connects humans to other living beings and nature, which is essential for the survival of the planet. As Zambrano states, «Feeling is what makes us feel life, where it is and where it is not, or where it is not yet» (Zambrano, 1989, p. 30). Projecting into the future and enabling future generations to project into a present that is still under construction allows young generations to already take care of an embryonic future. Education for the future, or Future Literacy (Miller, 2018; Annacontini, 2023), aims to prepare individuals to understand and navigate future scenarios, promoting skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity to address complexity (Morin, 2011). The core of this vision is the possibility to develop a mindset that favors multiple and diversified identities, defending the right to difference and the reception of migrant worlds and cultures, a new world that respects the environment and otherness in all its manifestations. A way of thinking that places the continuation of life on our planet at its center, protecting the existence of the Earth and future generations in the multiplicity of their differences.

2 Cfr. <https://www.mintel.com/press-centre/the-eco-gender-gap-71-of-women-try-to-live-more-ethically-compared-to-59-of-men/> (last consultation: 18/03/2025).

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Links:

⟨<https://www.mintel.com/press-centre/the-eco-gender-gap-71-of-women-try-to-live-more-ethically-compared-to-59-of-men/>⟩ (last consultation: 18/03/2025)
⟨https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/8-marzo-scuola-e-donna-professoressa-sono-1-815-cento-AFKUvMzC?refresh_ce=1⟩ (last consultation: 18/03/2025)
⟨<https://ilmanifesto.it/elena-pulcini-la-filosofa-che-ascoltava-la-vulnerabilita>⟩ (last consultation 14/02/2025)
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