

Mother Earth – Gender Ecology for Social Justice Madre Terra – l'ecologia di genere per la giustizia sociale

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DOUBLE BLIND PEER REVIEW

ABSTRACT

Gender ecology, by exploring its interconnections with the environment and social justice, highlights how gender inequalities influence access to and management of natural resources. In the context of ecological, digital, and intercultural transitions, it is essential to consider how educational policies and teaching practices can foster an inclusive approach, recognizing the crucial role of women and minorities in environmental sustainability. Educational research must, therefore, integrate gender perspectives to address current global challenges, encouraging the development of curricula that are sensitive to social and ecological dynamics.

KEYWORDS

Ecology, gender, education, rights, participatory activities.
Ecologia, genere, didattica, diritti, attività partecipative.

L'ecologia di genere, esplorando le sue interconnessioni con ambiente e giustizia sociale, mette in luce come le disuguaglianze di genere influenzino l'accesso e la gestione delle risorse naturali. Nel contesto delle transizioni ecologiche, digitali e interculturali, è fondamentale considerare come le politiche educative e le pratiche didattiche possano promuovere un approccio inclusivo, riconoscendo il ruolo cruciale delle donne e delle minoranze nella sostenibilità ambientale. La ricerca in didattica deve quindi integrare prospettive di genere per affrontare le attuali sfide globali, favorendo la creazione di *curricula* che siano sensibili alle dinamiche sociali ed ecologiche.

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1. Feminist Political Ecology

Feminist political ecology is based on the idea that environmental crises are inextricably linked to social and gender inequalities (Barca, 2024). Analyzing the forces of social reproduction and their relationship with the environment allows us to understand the roots of ecological injustices and propose sustainable alternatives. The protection and sustainable management of natural resources represent a crucial challenge in the current context of environmental crisis and climate change. From this perspective, the contribution of women and marginalized communities emerges as essential for the development of sustainable practices and biodiversity conservation. Although these groups are often excluded from decision-making processes, their traditional knowledge and direct connection with the environment provide indispensable tools for addressing global ecological challenges (Agarwal, 1992; Rocheleau et al., 1996).

Women, particularly in rural and Indigenous societies, play a key role in managing natural resources, being responsible for water collection, food production, and the preservation of traditional seeds. Numerous studies highlight how their active participation can improve conservation policies and the sustainable use of land (Shiva, 1988).

Marginalized communities, including Indigenous and local groups, possess traditional ecological knowledge that has been passed down for generations and represents a fundamental resource for the sustainable management of ecosystems. Recognizing their territorial rights and including them in environmental governance processes are essential to ensuring the fair and effective protection of natural resources (Berkes, 1999).

Despite these contributions, structural barriers persist, hindering the full participation of women and marginalized communities in environmental management processes. Limited access to resources, gender discrimination, and the lack of legal recognition of traditional lands are factors that reduce their ability to influence environmental decisions (Agarwal, 2001). To overcome these obstacles, it is necessary to adopt inclusive approaches that value local knowledge and promote the active participation of these groups in environmental governance processes. Policies based on environmental and gender justice perspectives can contribute to ensuring a more equitable and effective management of natural resources (Martinez-Alier, 2002).

As bell hooks (1984) emphasized, oppressions are interconnected, and only an intersectional analysis can lead to real social and ecological transformation. Hooks criticizes mainstream feminism for often ignoring the experiences of Black women, poor women, and other marginalized subjects, arguing that any struggle for social justice must be intersectional to be truly transformative. This approach is also fundamental in feminist political ecology, which recognizes how gender, class, and ethnic oppressions are intertwined with ecological crises. Intersectionality, a central concept in bell hooks' thought, helps to understand how structures of domination operate simultaneously on multiple levels, reinforcing each other.

For example, Indigenous women and Afro-descendant communities often experience a double form of exploitation: on the one hand, they are disproportionately affected by extractivism and environmental destruction; on the other, their care work and social reproduction labor are rendered invisible and devalued. However, these very communities develop forms of resistance and sustainable resource management models that offer concrete alternatives to climate and social crises.

As hooks highlights, authentic transformation can only occur if environmental struggles go beyond a superficial analysis of ecological damage and address the systemic roots of inequalities. This means placing at the center of the debate not only nature conservation but also social justice, the dismantling of power hierarchies, and the recognition of the value of marginalized communities' knowledge and practices.

2. Education and Sustainability: A Gender Perspective

Education plays a key role in promoting an aware and inclusive ecological citizenship. Dozza (2018) emphasizes the importance of co-constructing ecological thinking to foster a holistic approach to sustainability, highlighting how education should be understood as a participatory and transformative process. In this perspective, Sterling (2001) proposes the idea of sustainable education, which is not limited to the transmission of knowledge but promotes cultural and systemic change through critical thinking and reflexivity.

Integrating gender perspectives into educational curricula allows for a greater critical awareness of the relationships between social equity and environmental protection. Scholars such as Gaard (2015) in the field of ecofeminism and Subramaniam (2014) in environmental and science education studies argue that an intersectional ecological education is essential to deconstruct the power hierarchies that perpetuate both gender inequality and environmental degradation.

At the international level, Orr (1992) stresses that environmental education should not be limited to a technical dimension but should stimulate a deeper understanding of the links between social justice and sustainability. In this context, critical pedagogies, such as those proposed by Freire (1968) and revisited by Kahn (2010) in ecological

education, encourage learning that challenges structures of oppression and promotes the active participation of individuals in building a just and sustainable future.

Adopting an intersectional approach in ecological education helps develop a sense of collective responsibility, recognizing the role of marginalized communities in constructing alternative knowledge and resistance practices. In this way, education is configured not only as a tool for knowledge transmission but also as a means of social and ecological transformation.

Italy's Law 92/2019, which introduced civic education into the national school system, refers to environmental education in Article 1, paragraph 3. The text specifies that environmental education and sustainable development are among the topics covered in civic education, in line with the objectives of the UN's 2030 Agenda. This perspective appears essential, especially considering the interdisciplinary nature of civic education, to convey the importance of GreenComp¹ and link it to human rights through the lens of intersectionality, as suggested by hooks.

An example of a school project conducted in a high school in Lanciano (Chieti, Italy), led by a natural sciences teacher as part of civic education, focused on reflecting on the connection between natural resources, labor exploitation, and gender issues in coltan mining in Congo.

The vast underground wealth of Congo has resulted in a long history of exploitation and violence. One of the most well-known cases is the mining of columbite-tantalite, or coltan, an alloy of metals widely used in the production of batteries for electronic devices, from mobile phones to GPS systems. The widespread diffusion of these new technologies since the late 1990s has caused an incredible increase in the value of this mineral, which is predominantly found in the North Kivu region of Congo and can be easily extracted just beneath the soil surface. With between 60% and 80% of the world's coltan reserves located in Congo, the country has experienced indiscriminate resource exploitation by large international companies, as well as the involvement of various armed groups controlling the extraction processes. The profits from coltan mining have fueled violent conflicts over territorial control.

Due to widespread poverty and unemployment in Congo, women, young people, and children are often exploited in mining operations deep in the forests, forced to extract the mineral using rudimentary tools for extremely low wages (as little as \$0.10 per day, compared to coltan's market value of around \$600 per kilogram). The mined coltan is then exported to countries such as the United States, Germany, Belgium, and various Asian nations. The coltan issue is therefore closely linked to the exploitation of Congolese resources and the cycles of violence that have affected the country in recent decades.

After illustrating this situation, along with a chemical explanation of coltan and an introduction to planned obsolescence, the teacher encouraged the class to break this cycle of exploitation by organizing a collection of used mobile phones. The goal was to refurbish the devices and donate them to organizations supporting migrants, allowing them to stay in touch with their families. This example of active citizenship and real-world engagement—symbolized by the collection box for used phones—brought together subjects such as geo-history, economics, chemistry, and international law. It helped students understand the interconnectedness of different aspects of life on the planet and highlighted how marginalized communities face similar issues globally. As Freire argued, understanding these systemic issues is essential for oppressed groups to find the courage to resist and fight for change.

3. Environmental Justice and Human Rights

Struggles for environmental justice are often led by women and activists who denounce inequalities in the distribution of natural resources and ecological damage. This phenomenon fits into a broader reflection on the correlation between social justice and environmental protection, as highlighted by numerous scholars and activists.

Kennedy (2000) documents the work of human rights defenders fighting for a fairer and more sustainable world, emphasizing the role of local communities in resisting environmental injustice. Nobel Peace Prize laureate Wangari Maathai (2009) demonstrated through her Green Belt Movement in Africa how women can be agents of change in the fight against environmental degradation and deforestation, promoting reforestation and women's empowerment through education.

Similarly, Vandana Shiva (1993) has highlighted the link between ecology and women's rights, pointing out how the neoliberal development model has often sacrificed local economies and ecosystems in favor of profit. Her research brings attention to the concept of ecofeminism, which connects environmental protection with the struggle for female emancipation.

In Italy, the Environmental Education Guidelines advocate for an approach that goes beyond merely transmit-

1 The *GreenComp* is the European sustainability competence framework, developed by the European Commission in 2022 to promote sustainability education and integrate environmental competencies into educational and training systems. GreenComp defines a set of competencies that help citizens and workers make informed decisions for a more sustainable future. The framework is structured into four key areas: Embody sustainability values; Embrace a sustainability mindset; Act for sustainability and Collaborate for sustainability.

ting theoretical knowledge about ecosystems and environmental issues. Instead, they promote the development of critical thinking and a sense of responsibility towards the environment.

Through participatory teaching methodologies such as experiential learning and problem-solving, young people engage in educational processes that make them aware of the interdependence between humans and nature, as demonstrated by the experience in Lanciano. Kolb (1984) emphasizes that this awareness is fundamental for encouraging sustainable behaviors and fostering active engagement in protecting the planet. Environmental education, in particular, helps develop skills that extend beyond the individual level, preparing new generations to collaborate in collective contexts to solve ecological and social problems.

Thus, environmental education should not be considered a specialized subject but rather a cross-disciplinary approach that intertwines with various fields, from geography to ethics, from economics to politics. This integrated approach helps shape ecologically conscious citizens capable of making informed decisions and actively participating in building a more sustainable society. Moreover, environmental education has a strong transformative value: it does not simply convey knowledge but changes young people's perceptions and behaviors, fostering a culture of sustainability that can be shared within their communities. Schools, educational institutions, and informal training projects become privileged spaces for cultivating active ecological citizenship, equipping individuals to face present and future environmental challenges with responsibility and awareness.

De Vita (2025) focuses on ecofeminist pedagogy, an approach that intertwines educational theories with ecological thinking and feminist movements' demands. This paradigm starts from the awareness that the logic of domination and exploitation that has historically oppressed women is the same that has led to environmental degradation and the global ecological crisis. In this sense, education becomes a fundamental tool for deconstructing patriarchal and anthropocentric narratives, promoting a new vision of the relationship between humans, nature, and society.

The ecofeminist pedagogy proposed by De Vita emphasizes the importance of education in fostering a sense of interconnectedness among living beings, valuing educational practices based on care, collective responsibility, and respect for the environment. The goal is not only to transmit ecological knowledge but also to train individuals capable of critical thinking and transformative action, capable of challenging unsustainable development models and social inequalities. Ecofeminist pedagogy presents an opportunity to renew educational thinking, overcoming traditional separations between humans and nature, culture and environment, theory and practice. This educational model promotes training that not only raises awareness of environmental issues but also provides tools to build a more equitable, sustainable, and inclusive society.

3. Conclusions: Reconceptualizing Care and Intergender Relations

Gender ecology is deeply intertwined with issues of care and family relationships, highlighting how caregiving practices and mutual support are influenced by gender dynamics and social transformations. Studies such as those by Lopez (2018) and Lopez & Altamura (2019) analyze how transnational migrations contribute to redefining caregiving roles both within families and in their communities of origin. Specifically, these studies show how caregiving work is often delegated to migrant women, creating new hierarchies and global inequalities. This phenomenon fits into a broader system of division of care work, reflecting patriarchal structures and asymmetries of economic and social power.

Similarly, Loiodice (2020) emphasizes the importance of rethinking intergender relations to address structural issues such as gender-based violence and to promote a culture of social and ecological sustainability. From this perspective, the concept of gender ecology is not limited to reflections on environmental justice but extends to the need to build fairer and more inclusive relationship models. Social sustainability, in fact, cannot exist without a rebalancing of gender relations and a recognition of care as an essential element for collective well-being.

In this context, gender ecology encourages a rethinking of the value of care work not only in economic terms but also as a fundamental practice for building fairer and more sustainable societies. This approach challenges the traditional division of caregiving roles between men and women and proposes a model in which caregiving responsibilities are more equitably shared between genders. Furthermore, it underscores how environmental and social sustainability are closely interconnected: respect for the environment and natural resources is linked to a social organization that recognizes the value of care work and promotes non-hierarchical and non-violent relationships.

Ecopedagogy represents an innovative educational perspective aimed at addressing sustainability challenges through a holistic and interdisciplinary approach that intertwines ecological, social, and cultural dimensions. It goes beyond promoting traditional environmental education and emerges as a transformative educational practice, fostering critical awareness of the interconnections between humans and the planet, as well as collective responsibilities in managing natural resources and building fairer and more equitable societies.

According to Pinto Minerva (2017), ecopedagogy should center on nature and respect for the environment,

encouraging a more harmonious relationship between humans and ecosystems. This approach is based on the idea that education should cultivate a sense of belonging to the global community and promote sustainable lifestyles. In this perspective, knowledge is not merely a set of transmitted notions but a practice aimed at transforming behaviors and mindsets, developing an ecological consciousness capable of guiding daily choices and collective policies.

Semeraro (1998) enriches this vision by emphasizing the central role of environmental education in shaping responsible citizenship. He highlights how ecological awareness must go hand in hand with education in democratic participation and civic engagement. Only by forming conscious and active citizens is it possible to build a society that protects the common good and effectively addresses environmental and social crises.

Ulivieri (1995) introduces an additional point of reflection, emphasizing the importance of gender-sensitive education to counter gender discrimination and promote women's empowerment. Ecopedagogy, in fact, can serve as a space for transformation in terms of gender equity, recognizing the value of knowledge and practices traditionally associated with women, often linked to environmental and community care. Promoting an education that is attentive to gender issues means not only ensuring equal access to knowledge but also valuing more inclusive, collaborative, and community-oriented educational approaches.

Ecopedagogy emerges as an educational paradigm that goes beyond merely conveying information about the environment to become a tool for social change. It promotes an education that integrates ecological awareness with social justice, recognizing the importance of empowering all citizens—especially women—in building a sustainable and inclusive future.

Gender ecology provides a theoretical and practical framework for understanding the interconnections between the environment and social justice, highlighting the crucial role of women and marginalized groups in sustainable resource management. It is desirable for educational policies to integrate a gender perspective into curricula to address global challenges, fostering a cultural shift toward a more equitable and sustainable future.

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