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Women's precarity in a globalised world: an ecofeminist perspective

As French philosopher, anthropologist and sociologist Bruno Latour noted, "[f]rom the time the term 'politics' was invented, every type of politics has been defined by its relation to nature" (2004 [1999]: 1). When the exploitation of nature became a subject of profit and global political discourse, women's situation in the labour market underwent significant changes, resulting in precarity and exploitation due to their perceived proximity to nature. This presumed connection between women and nature has been studied by ecofeminist thinkers, revealing its profound influence on women's roles in the labour system, particularly in capitalist societies where diversity is often sacrificed in favour of uniformity to facilitate the sale of products to a global audience (King 1986: 184). This contribution aims to explore, from an ecofeminist perspective, statistics regarding women's precarity worldwide, with particular attention to the situation of migrant women in the global North and native women in the global South.

Keywords: women's precarity, ecofeminist perspective, housewifisation, social justice, feminisation of poverty

Introduction

For centuries women and nature have been compared and viewed as more similar and interconnected to each another than men and nature. In the last 50 years, ecofeminists have scrutinised this presumed connection, trying to understand not only the

way it has evolved over time but why. Some of these ecofeminist thinkers (Merchant 1980, King 1986, Shiva 1988, Radel 2009) have drawn attention to the consequences that men's approach to nature have had on women and to the way capitalism and gender-based divisions of labour have resulted in women's precarity[1] worldwide.

These perspectives have much in common with Carl Cassegård's definition of Critical Theory's task concerning nature, which is "to sharpen our awareness of how we, as subjects, are related to nature and how we may relate to nature in our praxis" (2021: 6). Considering that the connection between nature and women is also influenced by their similar position at the bottom of the hierarchies of power still prevalent in our societies, the purposes of this contribution are primarily threefold: 1) to statistically analyse the precarity of women's labour in both the global North and South; 2) to explore, from an ecofeminist perspective, how the relationship between women and nature, particularly the exploitation of the latter in a patriarchal and capitalist world, has an impact on women and their roles and positions in various societies; and 3) to examine women's situation in the global South and migrant women in the North within a framework that acknowledges the roles of gender, racism, caste, and class within the interaction between humans and nature.

Women's labour and precarity: some important ecofeminist perspectives

Karen J Warren (2000: 66) wrote that "[T]he 'necessary conditions' of a theory (say, ecofeminist philosophical theory) are like the borders of a quilt: they delimit the boundary conditions of the theory without dictating beforehand what the interior [...] of the quilt does or must look like". When we attempt to define ecofeminism, it is important to keep in mind that the diverse backgrounds and fields of study of the movement's leaders have woven together a patchwork of various perspectives. Nevertheless, the borders of the quilt representing ecofeminist theory may be summarised by the definition of ecofeminism provided by Carol J Adams (1993: 1):

> Ecofeminism identifies the twin dominations of women and the rest of nature. To the issues of sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism that concern feminists, ecofeminists add naturism –the oppression of the rest of nature. Ecofeminism argues that

1 In the text I will use the definition of precarity given by the European Institute for Gender Equality (2017: 21-22) which, in terms of precarious employment, is a condition related to at least one of these aspects: very low pay, very short working hours, low job security.

> the connection between the oppression of women and the rest of nature must be recognized to understand adequately both oppressions.

While this definition may be agreed to by all representatives of ecofeminism, the history of the movement has witnessed different approaches and, consequently, different explorations of the interconnection between women and nature. The first strand of ecofeminism, labelled as essentialist and cultural, was developed from the second half of the 1970s to the end of the 1980s and it considered women closer to nature for several reasons, primarily their role in biological reproduction[2]. This initial approach received much criticism mainly because it tended to "give acceptance to those male-created images that define women as primarily biological beings" (Biehl 1991: 11), perpetuating stereotypes that have oppressed women for centuries. The social strand, which replaced the first approach in the 1990s, "centered women's interests in conservation and the environment in their socially constructed gender roles of childcare and the gendered division of labour" (Radel 2009: 332). It began to analyse how women in the global North were (and statistically still are) relegated to caregiving roles, with the primary focus of their job being mostly the upbringing of children, while in the South they took on the responsibility of ensuring the survival of their families and their immediate needs, such as providing drinking water and preparing meals.

In *The Death of Nature*, one of the most well-known ecofeminist manifestos, Carolyn Merchant (2020 [1980]) showed how the link between women and nature has deep-rooted origins because throughout human history they have always been compared. However, this comparison changed over time, particularly after the scientific revolution of the 17th century. Before then, nature was perceived as a loving mother, leading humans to respect it by imposing limits on its exploitation. Yet, with the advent of scientific discoveries, the perception shifted to view nature as a malevolent and unpredictable woman, akin to a witch[3], who needed to be dominated and controlled. In this context, Francis Bacon, considered the father of modern science, "transformed tendencies already extant in his own society in a total program advocating the control of nature for human benefit" (Merchant 2020[1980]: 164). Nature was to become married to men, and this marriage

2 Known advocates of this approach are Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Charlene Spretnak, and Andree Collard.

3 It is not a coincidence that Bacon deliberately used the imagery of witch-hunt to describe his new scientific method. Significantly, another aspect connected to the emergence of modern society (which had an important impact on women and their condition) was the persecution and burning of midwifes as witches. This persecution was motivated not only by religious reasons but also by economic considerations, such as the professionalisation of medicine and the consequent male hegemony over the field (Mies 2014 [1986]: 83-87).

would be dominating and abusing (DesJardins 2013, 226). In essence, nature had to be subjugated, turned into a "slave", and moulded by the mechanical arts for the benefit of humans (Robbins 2007: 480). According to Merchant (2020[1980]: 190), the scientific revolution, its mechanical order, and its associated values of power and control marked the death of nature and the shift they brought ushered in a new economic era, paving the way for the globalisation and capitalism with which we are familiar today.

Ecofeminists such as Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva and economists such as Rosa Luxemburg and Ester Boserup have also emphasised the role played by colonialism in the history of women's precarity. For Luxemburg, colonialism is the constant necessary condition of capitalism: without colonies, capital accumulation would come to a stop (2003 [1913]: 344). Additionally, as Boserup has documented, women's impoverishment increased during colonial rule because colonial administrators de-skilled women in their own countries and "neglected the female agricultural labour force when they helped to introduce modern commercial agriculture to the overseas world" (2007 [1970]: 42). It is important to underline that colonialism had an impact not only on women in colonised countries but also on those in colonising ones. In the first case, the privatisation of land eroded women's traditional land use rights and women's productivity was destroyed "both by removing land, water and forests from their control as well as through the ecological destruction of soil, water and vegetation systems" (Shiva 2016 [1988]: 3). In the second, when women were not forced to join the men in the colonies to guarantee the reproduction of the white race and to teach the virtues of civilisation to colonised women – viewed as savages (Deplano 2013: 71) – they had to rise to the status of "ladies" by being "domesticated and civilised into proper housewives" (Mies 2014 [1986]: 95-100).

In the "motherland", this process of "civilisation" into which women were forced is what Mies defined, with a newly coined term, as "housewifisation". Using Mies's word, housewifisation is "the main strategy of international capital to integrate women worldwide into the accumulation process" (Mies 2014: 4). Although it took (and still takes) place in a private and informal environment, women's labour as housewives was essential to the development of the capitalist economy because it allowed men's wage-labour, which has always been considered the real form of production. So, housewifisation and colonisation can be considered two sides of the same coin: women were exploited both in plantations and inside their houses. Additionally, just as in the global North women turned into perfect housewives and consumers of needs – which created

the market for early capitalism[4] – in the global South women became an integral part of the production system, as labour costs in the colonies were kept low by a system of slave labour and other forms of labour control.

With the emergence of capitalism, houses and families underwent considerable changes, compared to how they had been in precapitalist patriarchal societies. Factories became the new centres of socialisation and production. Men were the sole wage labourers in the family and, gradually, children began to be ejected from home, too. Thus, families ceased to be not only the productive but also the educational centre of people's lives and they began to be transformed into the colonies of the little white man (Dalla Costa and James 1975 [1972]). In this context, as previously mentioned, women became the optimal labour force: as housewives, it was easier to gain political and ideological control over them, and their work could be considered as an "income-generating activity" to be bought at a cheaper price (Mies 2014[1986]: 166). Additionally, their workday was potentially unending (Dalla Costa and James 1975[1972]: 25). In the South, instead, the primary sectors of women's work included large-scale manufacturing industries (such as electronics, textiles, and toys), small-scale manufacturing of consumer goods (including handicrafts, food processing, art objects, and garment manufacture), agriculture (involving cash crop production, tea and coffee plantations, and commercial agriculture), and sex tourism. Finally, in manual labour roles, women were promoted in advertisements as the most docile and manipulable workers, with their small hands being considered an advantage because they enabled faster and more meticulous work (Grossman 1979: 50). They did not work to produce what they needed but rather what others, both in the global North and South, could buy.

Women's precarity in more recent years: some statistics

In 2017, the European Institute of Gender Equality (EIGE) published some of their statistics regarding precarious employment by gender. It showed that in Europe in 2014, 19% of women, compared to 8% of men, had very low-paid jobs; 9% of them had low job security, and 3% had noticeably short working hours. When considering all these dimensions combined, it resulted in precarious jobs for 27% of women, compared to 15% of men (EIGE 2017: 21). Additionally, taking into account the educational attainment, women with high qualifications had more precarious jobs than men with medium qualifications and, while statistically "[T]he share of people in precarious employment decreases with age [...], women

4 According to Sombart (1988 [1913]), capitalism was born out of luxury consumption, not to satisfy the needs of the masses.

with low and medium qualifications are at high risk of precariousness throughout their working lives" (EIGE 2017: 22). Finally, even in cases where women and men had the same educational level, in 2014, 45% of women with low qualifications worked in precarious employment compared to 26% of men (EIGE 2017: 23).

An even more recent study by the EIGE, referring to data dating back to 2019, reported that in Europe there was an "uneven concentration of women and men in different sectors of the labour market" (EIGE 2019). While 30% of women, compared to 8% of men, worked in education, health, and social work (mostly because these are still considered "women's jobs"), only 7% of women, compared to 30% of men, were employed in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (EIGE 2019). Another study, commissioned by the European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs (Fiadzo et al. 2020), showed statistics regarding precarity in the post-Covid era and confirmed similar data: "[W]omen are still seen as primary caregivers, whether that be for children, dependant family members or the elderly" and Covid reinforced that (Fiadzo et al. 2020: 30). Additionally, it has been calculated that Covid-19 has been harder on women than the 2008 financial crisis: lockdowns caused children to be out of school, at home, along with elderly dependants in need of care, so women's share of unpaid work increased (Fiadzo et al. 2020: 34).

The last EIGE study (2023), referring to percentages regarding European citizens in 2021, calculated the FTE[5] employment rates based on sex, family composition, age, education level, country of birth, and disability. The most interesting gender gaps, in this case, concern single women and men, women and men as lone parents, and women and men in couples with children. Statistics show that single men have greater access to the labour market than single women (56% compared to 32%) and that lone mothers and women in relationships with children participate in the labour market at the same rate (65%), indicating that partnership does not affect their employment prospects. However, being in a relationship appears to be an advantage for men with children because 91% of them, compared to 86% of lone fathers, have access to the labour market (EIGE 2023: 28). The country of birth is also a relevant aspect to consider in these statistics: while the difference between native women and men regarding employment rates in 2021 was 14% (2% lower than the 16% of the 2014), for foreign-born women and men the disparity in work opportunities differed by 20% and it was 1% higher than the gap in 2014.

5 The FTE employment rate is a unit to measure employed people in a way that makes them comparable even though they may work a different number of hours per week (EIGE 2023: 27).

Before analysing the specific situation of migrant women in the global North and native women in the South, it is interesting to consider some statistics regarding gender and precarious work in the United States. In 2019, a study published by the University of Massachusetts (Albelda et al. 2019: 5-6) showed that from 1995 to 2017, the standard employment relation (SER) had often excluded women and workers of colour. When not excluded, they were relegated to low-paid jobs as office administrators or in the service, agricultural, and retail sectors. Additionally, adequate resources for the basic social reproduction of workers had been "absent from the conversation surrounding women's empowerment" (Albelda et al. 2019: 8). Thus, women had been forced to take on flexible jobs not because these reflected their genuine preferences, but because women workers were called to free up time to manage the household. Interestingly enough, "[F]lexibilised labor is also facilitated by the subordination of labor in the Global South: globalization has radically changed the way in which U.S. firms can outsource their supply chains to precarious workers that are themselves gendered and racialized" (Albelda et al. 2019: 10). Finally, another and more recent post-Covid study in the USA showed that, between February and Fall 2020, employment precarity increased by 14% among women and 21% among people of colour, mostly non-Hispanic Black respondents (Oddo et al. 2023: 5).

While some statistics regarding migrant women in the North have already been mentioned, more specific studies showed other interesting data. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), in 2015 there were 67,1 million domestic workers in the world, 11,5 million of whom were international migrants. Approximately 73,4% of all migrant domestic workers were women (ILO 2015: xiii). It must be considered that domestic work has become a globalised profession with the feminisation of migration, so women from poorer countries often move to richer ones due to the growing demand for domestic services, which allows them to support their families back home (UN Women 2011: 35).

A more recent ILO report calculated that, in 2019, 66,2% of migrant workers were in services. More specifically, 79,9% of migrant women workers were in services, 14,2% in industries, and 5,9% in agriculture. In comparison, "the distribution of men migrant workers between industry and services [was] relatively more balanced" (ILO 2021: 13). In the care sector, the representation of migrant women varies significantly but, overall, it continues to be highly gendered (Sweeney 2020: 29). It is also extremely important to consider that "[F]or migrant workers, an insecure citizenship status compounds [a sense of] vulnerability by narrowing their choices in the labour market and making them more at risk of exploitation" (Jinnah 2020: 211). Regarding this, the European Parliament resolution of 19 October 2010 on precarious women workers underlined that migrant women's work is frequently low-paid, irregular and

sometimes illegal (section Q). Additionally, it is not new that migrant women in the global North suffer from the double discrimination of gender and race, thus they are "more likely to be mistreated or subjected to violence or sexual abuse" (European Parliament 2010). As the same statistics published by ILO in 2021 shows, with some exceptions, women usually make up around half of migrants worldwide but, according to the European Parliamentary Research Service (Orav and Killmayer 2023: 2):

> Now women often migrate alone in search of work. Some of them arrive irregularly in the EU, while others arrive regularly but then fall into irregularity, often because there are gendered barriers to [the] formal labour market. This may push them to the informal labour market and towards jobs considered "traditionally female", such as domestic helpers, carers or hospitality workers.

To conclude this overview on women's precarity worldwide, it is relevant to consider data regarding women workers in the global South. In developing countries, the gender gap in terms of where women and men work is still extremely significant. Women's work routinely revolves around food, domestic activities, and other jobs linked to their reproductive roles (Chant 2014: 14). Domestic work for the family is commonly viewed as an extension of women's duties and is typically undervalued, undocumented and obviously precarious. In the already mentioned 2011 report by UN Women, it is shown that in South Asia domestic workers were not covered by unemployment insurance, retirement pension schemes, compensation for employment injuries, and general legislation for occupational health and safety (UN Women 2011: 36). Even when women's work did not revolve around domestic activities, they were frequently engaged in vulnerable or unpaid positions in family businesses or on farms (UN Women 2011: 35). The same statistics indicate that women also dominated employment in assembly manufacturing in Export Processing Zones (EPZs), "areas in which labour and environmental standards may be relaxed or eliminated in order to attract foreign investors" (UN Women 2011: 35).

A more recent study by UN Women (2019: 119) reports that in a wide range of countries, despite women's attempts to change their livelihoods, agriculture remains feminised, and men often migrate to find jobs in urban areas, leaving women in charge of farms and family businesses. The situation in slums is even more precarious, especially because of their location at the periphery of cities, which precludes access to remunerative markets. For example, in India, "[W]hen 700,000 squatters resettled on the periphery of Delhi, female employment fell 27% [while] male employment only decreased by 5%" (Kunieda and Gauthier 2007: 16). Life in slums becomes more challenging for women when considering aspects linked to public services. Since slums are often illegal, it is not possible to

build toilets at home and, for poor women, it is more difficult to find the right time to access public toilets while avoiding molestation and harassment (Khosla 2013: 11-12). Other problems are caused by water, electricity, and waste management. Where houses lack water, for example, women "have to collect it from public standpipes, wells, boreholes, rivers or storage drums served by private tankers" (Chant 2013: 11) and when and where electricity is unavailable, women's time needs to be spent gathering or buying fuel to cook meals or make fires (Chant 2014: 16). Where there is no refrigeration, they also have to shop daily to guarantee fresh food. Finally, other problems in terms of sanitary conditions are created by ineffective solid waste management and, since women spend more time at home compared to men, the health risk due to unsanitary conditions is higher for them (Khosla 2013: 12).

Conclusions

When women's lives and work are closely related to nature for several reasons, environmental problems and the protection of the environment become crucial for them and their well-being because they depend on them. In the 21st century, a more recent strand of ecofeminism has begun to share similar analysis with the environmental justice movement, some of them related to what Pearce (1978) defined as the "feminisation of poverty"[6] and to the different impact that catastrophic events have on men and women (Buckingham 2004: 152). Although it has been proved that women and children are more affected than men by catastrophic events caused by environmental problems, women worldwide are still largely absent and excluded from the climate change debate, which has been shaped by stereotypically masculinist discourses (MacGregor 2010: 129). Additionally, people who are more socially and economically marginalised are also more vulnerable to the effects of global warming, and women still represent approximately 70% of the world's poor due to the precarity of their jobs (MacGregor 2010: 130).

Without the necessary resources to cope with the changes brought by the climate crisis, women's everyday conditions are more likely to worsen. Their low social status will also contribute to their exclusion from decision-making roles, yet governments and environmentalists will continue to expect them to take responsibility for protecting the Earth. In the global North, they are asked to

6 Diana Pearce coined the term in 1978 and it referred to the increasing poverty of women due to their gender. In her text, she explained how the poverty of men was different from the poverty of women and, as such, they had to be solved and treated differently (1978: 35). For further insight into the feminisation of poverty: Peterson 1987, Marcoux 1998, Chant 2006, Hinze and Aliberti 2007, and Melo 2019.

change their habits as consumers "by conserving energy, taking public transit, recycling waste, growing food and foregoing flights" (MacGregor 2010: 134). They are also encouraged to "green their household" and participate in environmental activism. In the global South, while climate change-related impacts make women's work more challenging due to its close relationship with nature, "gender analyses have sometimes led to development programmes that are explicitly designed to be carried out by unpaid women volunteers, based on the assumption that rural women are predisposed to taking an environmental care-taking role" (MacGregor 2010: 134).

It is safe to conclude, as also stated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2023), that discriminatory social norms and stereotypes continue to affect women professionally. When their jobs are remunerated, they usually work in sectors that often entail a lack of or limited labour law protection, exploitation by their employers, no entitlement to contribution-based social benefits, and restricted access to public services such as healthcare or childcare (Orav and Killmayer 2023: 6). These disparities are even more pronounced among migrant women in the global North where the European Commission estimated that one in five educated non-EU migrant women is overqualified for her job (Orav and Killmayer 2023: 6). However, worldwide, women are still expected to undertake most of the unpaid and domestic work in care sectors. Less than 10 years ago, it was calculated that women do an average of 75% of the world's total unpaid care work, such as childcare, caring for the elderly, cooking, and cleaning, generating only 37% of GDP[7], despite comprising half the world's working-age population (McKinsey Global Institute 2015: 2). Behind this percentage there are even more specific numbers: in regions such as South Asia, including India, and MENA[8] women undertake 80% to 90% of unpaid care work, and in Western Europe and North America statistics are only slightly lower (around 60% to 70%). If paid, this care work not only would improve women's situation in the labour market, but it could also be valued at $10 trillion of output per year, which would correspond to 13% of global GDP (McKinsey Global Institute 2015: 2).

7 Gross domestic product.

8 Middle East and North Africa.

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