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Ecofeminism and sustainable entrepreneurship: an alternative view of the planet

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Abstract

The wage gap is undeniable. Part-time employment and temporary employment have the distinctive trademark of women. In times of crisis, the number of families that are economically dependent on women increases. In view of the current crisis and the great deterioration of our planet, an alternative approach to this problem is ecofeminism. It is necessary to stop the expansion of profit margins and excessive consumerism in favour of other drivers of change more in line with sustainable development. This research presents an assessment of an activity on the perceptions of postgraduate students faced with moral dilemmas. The objective of this activity was to show that there are gendered differences when responding to such moral dilemmas. The methodology used is qualitative and information was collected from the answers provided by the students who participated in the activity. The results show that there are slight gendered differences in the responses.

Keywords: Eco-feminism, moral dilemmas, postgraduate students, qualitative methodology, gender.

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1. Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is not a new movement. It emerged in the 1970s with the joint emergence of the second wave of feminism and the Green movement. As Mellor (1997) states:

Ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movements, while at the same time offers a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women (p. 1).

Francoise d'Eaubonne, who coined the term ecofeminism in 1974, spoke of a primeval matriarchy in which equity between men and women existed. Later, this matriarchy was replaced by a patriarchy that controlled both agriculture and female fertility. The current crisis and the severe deterioration of the planet are undoubtedly a consequence of this patriarchal domination. Four years later, Susan Griffin writes her book 'Women and nature: The Roaring Inside Her', a call on women to regain contact with nature.

In the 1970s, movements such as Chipko in India and the Green Belt in Kenya adhered to this way of understanding contact with nature, but it was not until the 1980s and 1990s that ecofeminism joined other movements calling for social justice inspired by the policies of green parties and pacifist movements. In Spain, the philosopher Alicia Puleo made an outstanding contribution focused on promoting coexistence based on respect and justice towards nature.

In this author's view, ecofeminism is a redefinition of reality and of who we are as humans based on the analysis of how gender roles determine us and what our relations with nature should be in this century of climate change and ecological crisis (Redaccion EFEverde, 2018).

These gender roles to which Alicia Puleo alludes have defined the policies of different countries. The integration of women into politics dates from the end of the 20th century and has been a hard and very slow process. Women's suffrage promoted the advent of women in decision-making spaces. However, there is a great distance between women and men when it comes to being part of decision-making bodies as the percentage of women that occupy government positions is still very low in spite of participation quotas and positive discrimination measures.

And if we do not participate, our voice is not heard, and if our voice is not heard, we do not get to decide on policies as important as the preservation of the environment and care of our planet. And women have a lot to say on this highly important issue. They bring a different vision of environmental problems; it is about not idealising cultures that oppress women and leave the exploitation of our planet's natural resources in the hands of men. Because women have invested hope, time and energy in movements that promote the defence of the planet and neither they nor their experiences are taken into account in the development of a large number of policies, including environmental ones.

2. Problem statement

We live in a consumerist and individualistic society in which women represent more than half of the world's population, but our voices and experiences are silenced. It is therefore necessary to apply a gender perspective to the problem of the ecological crisis, to recognise the contributions of women to a new culture of sustainability which still remains pending; it is essential to make women visible and to recognise their ecological actions because women have much to say in this regard. And thus, ecofeminism arises as a response to our current crisis of values.

Based on these assumptions, we have carried out this qualitative research with a participatory methodology attempting to analyse the particular visions of women and men regarding environmental problems.

The objective of this research was to offer students a series of moral dilemmas related to environmental issues in order to ascertain gender differences.

3. Research questions

In order to carry out this research, we asked the following questions:

- Are students aware of environmental problems?
- Do the answers reveal gendered differences?

4. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this investigation is twofold. First, we aim to ascertain whether the student body is aware of environmental problems and, second, to analyse whether there are significant gendered differences in the answers given or whether these differences are subtle as ecofeminism maintains.

5. Research methods

This research involved the formulation of three moral dilemmas with the environment as main topic. A problematic situation was set up that presents a conflict of values due to the fact that the possible solutions may conflict with each other.

The following are the moral dilemmas in question:

- *Dilemma 1: Chemical Company.*

Imagine that you have been hired by a company that makes chemical products after an 18-month job search, a period through which you and your family have had a very rough time.

After some time working there, you realise from your own experience that in order to cut costs, the company is breaking the current environmental legislation and is contaminating the waters of a river with the waste of a chemical substance that goes unnoticed by the naked eye and whose effects cannot be verified in the short term, although in the long term it can generate serious health problems.

You are faced with a difficult dilemma:

Should you denounce the company for causing pollution following your ethical views, or should you remain silent in order to keep your job and that of your colleagues? (You could be fired, or if the fine and costs to adapt to environmental legislation were too high, the company could close or go elsewhere).

Which would weigh more heavily with you, your ethics or your personal interest in work?

- *Dilemma 2: A nuclear waste disposal facility*

A series of village councils in the province of Malaga are debating whether to offer themselves as sites for a nuclear waste station.

Some people are in favour; they recognise the potential dangers but their personal situation—unemployment, a lack of future prospects for their children, their relatives and their village—are leading them to favour the establishment of such a station. Also a large number of people are against the proposal; they are in many cases unemployed and aware of the difficulties of surviving in the future if they remain in their village, but even so they put their families health and a safe environment first in view of the potential danger involved in the installation of a nuclear waste station: accidents, radioactive leaks, etc.

The following dilemma is presented to the participants:

Which comes first, health or work? What are the red lines that cannot be crossed in relation to health or other factors in order to obtain employment? Does the end justify the means in a case like this? What would you do?

- *Dilemma 3: A polluting company.*

A company located on the banks of the River Guadalhorce needs to decide whether to dump its waste directly into the water as treating it would require a large investment, or to build a waste treatment plant and be a responsible company.

The dilemma presented is the following:

If you were the owner of the company, what would you do?

5.1. Design

We used a qualitative methodology. Participants were first shown a YouTube video called 'What are moral dilemmas?' so that they would know what we were talking about when we referred to moral dilemmas. Subsequently, after watching and claiming to having understood the video, participants were provided with prints showing two distinct sections: a heading with the classification variables (Gender, Age, Degree and Specialty) and then the three moral dilemmas. Participants were given a short time to individually think about what they had read and write their reflections on it.

Afterwards, each person had the chance to voluntarily present his or her reasoning in a class debate.

5.2. Sample

An incidental sample was used in order to carry out this research; the student body of the Master's for Secondary Education and Baccalaureate Teachers, Vocational Training and Language Teaching (MAES, Spanish acronym), with 20 participants from the Training and Career Guidance specialty and 16 enrolled in the Health Care Processes one. The majority of students enrolled in these two specialties participated, specifically 36 persons out of 46.

5.3. Analysis

First, in order to gain a better understanding of the data collected, a descriptive analysis of the variables that have been taken into account will be presented.

In terms of gender, the people who responded largely included women (66.7%), men reaching a lower figure (33.33%). This is related to the fact that the specialities this research covered (Training and Career Guidance, and Health Care Processes) are somewhat gender biased.

The target group age range is wide, although 58.7% are under 30 years of age. It is worth noting that this year older students have enrolled, people who had been working in other fields and who have now decided to seek a position in secondary education.

The qualitative data were analysed with Tagxedo, a word cloud creator which shows the most relevant topics in relation to, in this case, the moral dilemmas raised.

The analysis will first refer to the general results to then comment on the possible solutions given in class to each moral dilemma by both women and men.

Figure 1 shows the Tagxedo word clouds related to the first moral dilemma. We see that women (62.5%) are more in favour of denouncing the company for causing pollution and thus following their ethical inclinations, even when their job is at stake, while men opt largely for silence (75%).



Figure 1. Dilemma 1. Chemical company

Table 1 shows that a wide range of different solutions to this moral dilemma, some of them quite creative.

Table 1. Solutions for Dilemma 1

Summary of the solutions

Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talking to company management and reach agreements. • Reporting anonymously (media, environmental associations, legal action, social networks, etc). • Looking for another job • Presenting a programme with possible changes to be adopted in the company and reach an agreement to clean up the waters. • Bringing employees together to oblige the company to comply with the law. • Proposing new production systems, more efficient and with less environmental impact.
Men	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making the company understand that nowadays not only profits but also social costs should matter. • Telling someone else so that they can denounce the situation. • I wouldn't do anything, I don't think there's a solution and you have to eat and live. • I wouldn't say anything because my family depends on that job. • I would wait until I found another job.

The results of the second moral dilemma are presented below. The word clouds show that while women prioritise health over work (65.2%) and some talk about fighting against lack of awareness 34.8%, most men believe that the end justifies the means (75%) versus (25%) who prioritise health. The results of the second dilemma are presented below.



Figure 2. Dilemma 2. A nuclear waste station

Table 2 shows a wide range of different solutions to this moral dilemma, some of them quite creative.

Table 2. Solutions for Dilemma 2

Solutions	
Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparing a place far from villages for the stations. • Health is no child’s play. • Organising massive protests against the nuclear waste station.
Men	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating awareness on the dangers of a nuclear waste station in the village • Let them build it but I’m leaving the village. • I think the danger’s no big deal. • If it makes money its good for the people and the authorities will see that nothing bad happens • There are lots of nuclear waste stations and nothing bad happens there. • The issue is more about bad publicity than what might actually happen.

Finally, in the case of the third dilemma, while 87.5% of women are in favour of the creation of a waste treatment plant even if that means reducing the workforce and only 12.5% are in favour of dumping waste into the river, the data are more balanced in the case of men; while 41.7% are in favour of creating the treatment plant, 58.3% are in favour of dumping the waste into the river as they believe that work is the most important thing given that the family depends on it.

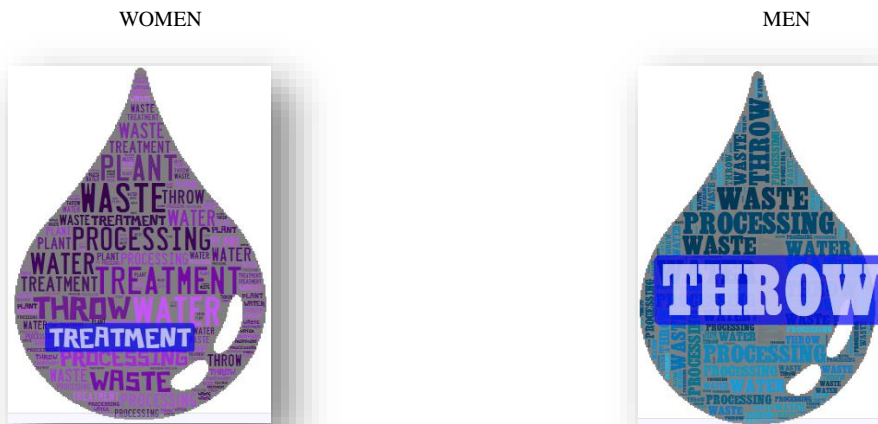


Figure 3. Dilemma 3. Waste treatment

Table 3 shows different solutions to this moral dilemma.

Table 3. Solutions for Dilemma 3	
Solutions	
Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We must care for the planet and try to pollute as little as possible. • Creating a waste treatment plant and then increase the workforce when profits increase. • Corporate social responsibility should be an increasingly valuable asset. A socially and environmentally responsible company generates profits for the company as well. Therefore, as a businesswoman I would do everything humanly possible to pollute as little as possible and would advertise my company to increase resources. • I would present the problem to the employees and if necessary I would modify their contracts, maybe some would be interested in reducing their working hours. • Refer the professional team to other companies in exchange for a bonus as in the future I will lower costs. • Move the waste to another plant that would accept it. • I would explain the problem and try to get subsidies related to environmental care and thus access resources so as to avoid reducing the workforce. • Rotating the workforce every 6 months until all of them can be hired again. • Talking to sponsors
Men	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As a businessman, in the long term it is better to create a treatment plant because future sanctions will be much more costly than building the treatment plant. In addition to this, I would apply for subsidies to be able to maintain the entire workforce. • In the short term, I would build the plant even if I had to let go workers, later if profits increased I'd hire back previous company employees. • It's difficult but in principle I think I'd dump the waste in the river and reduce the workforce in order to make profits and then I would make a decision in time.

6. Conclusion

There is no doubt that our planet is in crisis and in need of special careful attention for the sake of its sustaining and conservation. Given the results of this research and, even taking into account the sample bias, we believe that a gender perspective is essential when it comes to making decisions and acting. Women and men's visions are proved to be slightly gendered and therefore it is necessary to work together promoting equitable relations to respond to the environmental challenges that the 21st. century society is demanding from us.

The three moral dilemmas approach has revealed that results show slightly gendered differences and that these differences are maintained when it comes to giving solutions to the proposed dilemmas. Furthermore, the gender roles imposed by our society imply the existence of a differential vision in terms of experiences and decision making as there is different level of knowledge on natural resources, a different control of and access to them and a different level of opportunities to participate in decision making related to their management.

Therefore, the inclusion of a gender perspective in environmental policies is interesting and necessary since it determines the cultural vision that each society has with respect to gender roles. It allows identifying the women and men's contributions to society.

Braude and Low (2010) argue that analysing the relationship between environment and gender in the context of evolution and ecology allows us to understand why the behaviours of men and women have evolved differently.

Therefore, and as Puleo (2002) maintains, our human awareness needs to advance towards women and men equality as participants not only in environmental culture but also in nature. No society will progress unless it highlights the contributions of half of its population.

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