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Is sustainability sexist?

Marcella Corsi • 5 min.

INTERVIEW WITH MARCELLA CORSI

Tackling climate change would seem to be good for the planet and everyone on it: women, men, LGBTQI people, and ethnic minorities. Or is it? Economist

Marcella Corsi talked to us about why climate policy typically ignores gender

and what can be done to change that.

Initially your research was on the link between technical change and the division of labor. When did your focus begin to shift to gender?

Gender inequality has been recognized as an economic problem for at least 150 years. In *The Subjection of Women* (1869), British economist and philosopher John Stuart Mill called it "one of the chief hindrances to human improvement." It still is. As a Ph.D. student at the University of Manchester in the late 1980s, however, I wasn't yet sure how to make my feminism and my research fit together. Over time I made the connection and became a feminist economist. For the discipline as a whole, the publication of the first issue of *Feminist Economics* in 1995 was certainly a watershed.

What's the perspective of feminist economics on decarbonization?

Let's start with the basic unit of all societies: the household. European countries want households to become more energy-efficient and to embrace sustainable practices like conserving water and recycling waste. Eco-feminist economics, by contrast, recognizes that households' climate relevance goes beyond energy efficiency. Unpaid care and domestic labor—which is overwhelmingly performed by women—not only perpetuate gender inequality. They're also a free subsidy that helps propel economic growth and thus resource use by rich countries. Moreover, they facilitate a consumer culture that's widely recognized as having exceeded the earth's biophysical limits. The climate strategies of European countries don't make the connection between the exploitation of feminized care work and the exploitation of natural resources.



Marcella Corsi

Why is that connection not being made?

To be honest, not many governmental policies address gender aspects. Also, it's much easier to forge ahead to a post-carbon economy without doing anything to address the unfair intra-household division of labor between men and women. That would require much more fundamental change. To tackle global warming and social equality simultaneously, policymakers would have to address the gendered outcomes of each individual policy. Converting from cars to public transport, bicycles, and walking

sounds like a great idea. But it also increases the time and labor involved in shopping for food and other family necessities, which is generally done by women. Green policies need to be crafted in a way that promotes gender equality rather than increasing women's share of work and responsibility.

How could the transition to a low-carbon future pay more attention to gendered outcomes?

The transition to a carbon-neutral economy is currently a technocratic project. It needs to become a bottom-up project. It should involve a wide variety of groups: women, migrants, LGBTQI people, youth, elders, and disabled people. The absence of meaningful grassroots participation could partly explain the invisibility of gender in current policies. Yet decarbonization is an exciting opportunity to rethink a wide range of normalized features of daily life. It could actually be good for gender justice—if it incorporates feminist environmental goals. For this to happen, climate policies need to draw on insights

from feminist environmentalists, architects, urban designers, and transport planners. Increasing female participation and power in decision-making processes would help embed gender equality from the start.

What do you believe are the two most important eco-feminist desiderata?

First, we need to recognize that paid and unpaid care work are central components of the economy and its environmental impact. Second, we need to reduce the social and ecological costs of care work by distributing it fairly within society and by organizing it in ways that maximize efficiency, conserve resources, and minimize carbon emissions and waste.

Where can readers find out more about a feminist approach to decarbonization?

A good overview is provided by the four-page “Feminist Agenda for a Green New Deal,” which was published in September 2019 by a

coalition of women's rights and climate activists in the United States. The agenda advocates the creation of regenerative economies centered on feminist analysis, a shift from exploitative and unsustainable production patterns, and a rejection of false, purely technocratic solutions to the climate crisis. In late May 2020 the Women's Budget Group and the Women's Environmental Network, two women's advocacy organizations, published a more detailed paper entitled "Towards a Feminist Green New Deal for the UK."

It scrutinizes the gendered assumptions of Britain's climate policies and outlines ways to make decarbonization more inclusive.

Bio

Marcella Corsi is Professor of Economics at La Sapienza University in Rome, Italy. She holds a Ph.D. in economics from the University of Manchester (U.K.) and a degree in statistics/economics from La Sapienza

University. She has worked as consultant for the European Commission, the European Parliament, the OECD, and several institutions in Italy. She cofounded the web-magazine inGenere and is the editor of the International Review of Sociology. She is also the coordinator of Minerva - Laboratory on Diversity and Gender Inequality.

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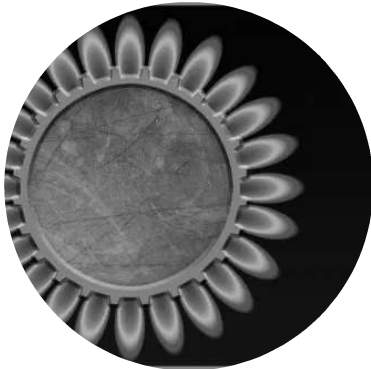


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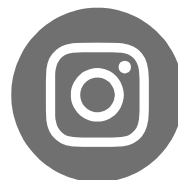


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