Ecofeminism

Gaard and Gruen begin by noting some disparities of wealth, resources, and consumption that exist in the world:

- 1% of the world’s population owns nearly half of the world’s assets (over 40%)
- The world’s richest 20% consume about ¾ of the world’s energy (76.6%), while the world’s poorest 20% consume only 1.5%. The middle 60% of the population consume 21.9%.
- The U.S. comprises only 4.2% of the world’s population, but consumes about 30% of the world’s resources.
- As we saw in the animal rights unit, the average U.S. citizen consumes 10-20 times more meat than the average person in Africa and Southern Asia.
- As we saw in the unit on famine relief, 25,000 children under the age of 5 die EVERY DAY due to easily preventable causes (almost all in impoverished countries).

Central claim: G&G argue that all of this indicates a sort of dominance of the rich over the poor, the developed nations over the undeveloped, the privileged over the marginalized. This is both an environmental AND a social issue. As they argue, both environmental and human problems stem from the same mutually-reinforcing oppression of humans in the natural world. So, in order to address problems of environmental degradation, you also have to address problems regarding the oppression of women, minorities, and other marginalized groups of society. They write,

Ecofeminism’s central claim is that these problems stem from the mutually reinforcing oppression of humans and of the natural world. It is no longer possible to discuss environmental change without addressing social change.

Why should we think this?

Oppressive Conceptual Framework: Human society is immersed in the sort of mindset or conceptual framework that makes relationships of domination and subordination seem normal, natural, and/or unquestionable.

There are 3 components of oppressive conceptual frameworks:

(1) Value Hierarchical Thinking: A scale or hierarchy, where the higher some individual is on the list, the more valuable it is. Alternatively, representing the world in such a way that those things that are “on top” or “higher up” are
considered more valuable. (e.g., globes are positioned in such a way that “white” countries are on top; see for example this clip from West Wing).

(2) Value Dualisms: Exclusive disjunctions (“Either X or Y, but not both”), where one disjunct is considered superior to the other. (Black or white; in literature, white is pure, just, etc., while black is evil, sinister, etc. Gay or straight; straight is “natural”, gay is “unnatural”. Male or female; males are “strong, rational, etc.” while women are irrational, weak, etc. Reason or emotion; You can’t be both—you’re either reasonable or you’re being emotional; mind-body; developed countries vs. 3rd world; civilized vs savage; wealthy vs poor) Every individual is stuffed into one of the two categories, and these are normatively “loaded”—i.e., you OUGHT to be one rather than the other, or it is BETTER to be one rather than the other.

(3) Logic of Domination: The first 2 things give rise to oppression. Individuals that are higher in the hierarchy, or on the “better” side of the dichotomies become the “masters” of the others. (husbands are the masters of their wives, whites are the masters of blacks, humanity is the master of nature, etc.) Consider: In the world, often something is feminized, animalized, or nature-ized before it is dominated (so that the domination is somehow “justified”; e.g., you can beat up a male if he is a “pussy”). Land-owners enslaved the people and claimed ownership over the land, and the benefits of the whole went to a very few.

The whites dominate others, and the first world dominates others. For instance, the disaster of colonizing the 3rd world, which led to the poor “participating in their own exploitation” and exporting all of their goods while incurring debt. “Where there used to be just enough food, now there was famine, environmental degradation, and an enormous debt to the colonial lenders. This is the system of ‘development’ ecofeminists see as causing the oppression of women, indigenous people, and the natural world today.”

The domination can be either explicit (e.g., slavery) or implicit (behavior implies it; e.g., household products are predominantly marketed toward women, for instance—this reinforces the mindset that women are “supposed” to be the ones staying at home).

White males
Other humans
Animals
Plants
Inanimate world
Let’s take a time out to examine the following question:

**Do Racism and Sexism Still Exist?**

**Figure 1: Pay By Gender (and Race)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Percentage of Men’s Pay That Group Earns (2011)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Women</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Women</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some possible explanations: (1) Not as many women are getting a college education, so there are less women entering the work force than there are men. (2) Not as many women are seeking high-paying jobs, so this makes their average pay be less than that of men.

Regarding (1), this is false. There are actually MORE women getting college degrees than there are men. So, this makes it even MORE remarkable that the average woman’s pay is less than the average man’s pay. Regarding (2), this is probably true. But, then it begs the question, “But WHY are women seeking/winding up with lower paying jobs than men?”

**Table 2: Pay By Race**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Percentage of White’s Pay That Group Earns (2010)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3: College Education By Race**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>% of Group Age 25+ With Bachelor’s Degrees or Higher (2010)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4: High School Education By Race**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>% of Group Age 25+ With H.S. Diploma/GED or Higher (2009)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Keep in mind that the data above is from the U.S. Census Bureau and so only accounts for U.S. citizens. If immigrants who are not currently citizens were accounted for, the data on race would surely show an even GREATER discrepancy.]

The Source of Racism and Sexism

What is the source of this discrepancy of pay and education between white males and everyone else? Some propose that our society functions in such a way that it causes females and non-whites to “disidentify” with success. In a very subtle way, our society is such that it fundamentally alters the psychologies of most people such that we all have certain expectations for people of various races and genders, for others AS WELL AS ourselves—and these expectations are simply HIGHER for white males than everyone else. Ultimately, this causes females and non-whites to both aim at and perform well below their potential. Here are some more interesting facts:

- In an experiment where scientists were asked to look at applications and recommend who to hire, and how much to pay them: The applications were various people who all had equal qualifications, but where some of the applicants had typical female names, and the rest had typical male names, the scientists primarily recommended hiring males. Furthermore, when asked how much the starting pay of each applicant should be, if hired, the average suggestion for a woman’s starting pay was significantly less than the average suggestion for a male (less than 90%). See here.

- Researchers at Stanford University discovered that women and minorities performed WORSE on standardized tests if they were reminded of their race or gender just before taking the exam. This is an indication that society might be such that it has shaped women and minorities to be such that they subconsciously sabotage THEMSELVES.

- Violence is a form of oppression and discrimination. Each year, ~200,000 cases of rape are reported (99% of the rapists are male, and 91% of rape victims are female). About 1 in 6 women in the U.S. have experienced either rape or attempted rape. One in six!

- Sexual harassment is another form of oppression and discrimination. About 12,000 cases of sexual harassment are reported each year (and the majority do not get reported at all). About 85% of these are reported by women being harassed by men.

- According to a recent Gallup Poll, 78% of blacks indicated that they believed racism to be widespread in the United States. Meanwhile, only 51% of whites believed racism to be widespread. Thus, there is a radical difference in perception among races regarding whether or not racial discrimination still persists.
The difference between white and black achievement does not extend only to education and salary. For instance, regarding punishment: 4.8% of black men, 1.9% of Hispanic men, and only 0.7% of white men are in prison. Regarding life expectancy: The life expectancy of whites is about 5 years longer than that of blacks. This has led many to suggest that whites are being given “a pass” more often than blacks, who are being targeted more by law enforcement. Furthermore, this may be an indication that whites are being given better education and/or health care than blacks.

Many of the causes of racism and sexism are very subtle. Consider some of the following aspects of society, and ask the question, Does a society like this foster very subtle psychological cues which cause us to have different expectations for different races and genders?

- The world is run by white males. The majority of political leaders, religious leaders, CEO’s, and college professors are white males. This strong correlation between leadership and being a white male causes us to subconsciously identify the two. Furthermore, it leaves non-white-males without role models of success to look up to or aspire to be like. For example:

  **Politicians:** Of 100 U.S. senators, only 20 are women (20%)—the highest number in history. Only 2 senators are black (2%). Of 435 representatives in the House of Representatives, only 76 are women (17%). Only 41 are black (9%).

  **Top Executives:** Of the 500 companies that make up the “Fortune 500” only 6 have black CEO’s (about 1%). Only 21 have women as CEO’s (about 5%).

- Stereotypically “women’s” jobs are still predominantly filled by women. For instance, 96% of secretaries are still women, and 91% of registered nurses, and 82% of public school teachers are women.

- Consider: (1) Most dates and marriages are proposed by the man. (2) Similarly, if one partner stays at home to take care of children, it is the woman 97% of the time. (3) Or, if one partner forfeits their career, or aims lower in the workplace (for instance, by moving to the city where the OTHER partner got a job, etc.), it is almost always the woman who does so. All of these commonplace occurrences are indicators that couples act as if, or subconsciously believe, that the man has the power in the relationship, or that his goals or decisions are more important.

- Little boys are commonly given Legos and Lincoln logs and toy trucks and army toys as kids. From an early age, the idea that they will go out into the world and BUILD
something or SOLVE things or be PRODUCTIVE or be LEADERS is fostered in their minds. Little girls are commonly given dolls, to dress up and do their hair, etc. From an early age, the idea that they will go out into the world and NOT produce things or be leaders—but rather, be “pretty” or take care of things—is fostered in their minds.

- Expressions like, “That was good... for a girl” are commonplace; indicating that the expectations for a female are lower than that for a male.

These are just a few examples of some aspects of society which may lend themselves to subtle differences in the expectations for different races and genders. There are a great many others. Can you think of more?

**Issues Cited by Gaard and Gruen:**

Here are just a couple of the many other concerns, identified by Gaard and Gruen:

- Minorities and Native Americans are disproportionately affected by toxic waste sites, dumps, etc. For instance, there are 413 neighborhoods in the U.S. containing hazardous waste facilities. These neighborhoods average 56% people of color. Meanwhile, the rest of the non-hazardous waste communities average 30% people of color. A study in 2007 concludes,

> “People of color and persons of low socioeconomic status are still disproportionately impacted and are particularly concentrated in neighborhoods and communities with the greatest number of facilities. Race continues to be an independent predictor of where hazardous wastes are located, and it is a stronger predictor than income, education, and other socioeconomic indicators. People of color now comprise a majority in neighborhoods with commercial hazardous waste facilities, and much larger (more than two-thirds) majorities can be found in neighborhoods with clustered facilities. African Americans, Hispanics/Latinos, and Asian American/Pacific Islanders alike are disproportionately burdened by hazardous wastes in the U.S.”

- Things like “carrying water, collecting firewood, weeding and hoeing, bearing children, preparing food, all usually seen as women’s work because these tasks take place in the ‘private’ sector or home, are not factored into a nation’s Gross National Product (GNP). Nor are natural resources factored in until they have been depleted (e.g., it is not until a forest becomes lumber that it is assigned a monetary value). In this way, both nature and women do not ‘count’ in the international market economy.” Meanwhile, “deforestation and water loss has meant longer walks each day for rural women to gather fuel wood and to haul water.”
Also, think about the ways in which we insult others. To insult a man, we often feminize him ("pussy", "fag", "cock-sucker", "douche", and so on). To insult a woman, we often animalize her ("bitch", "dog", "sow", "old hen", "minx", "mousy", and so on), or debase her femininity/sexuality ("whore", "slut", "hussy", "bimbo", and so on).

And there is a strong connection between nature and women as well. We often view nature as somehow feminine. The land is something to put our seed in. We speak of "Mother Earth", "the rape of the natural world", "virgin forests", etc. Meanwhile, the non-natural world is "man-made". In short, even our everyday terminology places man at the top of the hierarchy.

What explains this conceptual hierarchy described above? Some explanations:

1. **Evolution & Biology:** Since women were nursing, when hunting became prominent (rather than foraging, gathering), men became the natural "providers", rendering women second-class citizens; since women were protecting the babies, they themselves needed protecting, since children could not be abandoned (and fighting with a baby in tow would be dangerous for the baby). When agriculture became prominent (rather than hunting and gathering), we literally began to view nature as something to be controlled. Furthermore, we had physical strength before we had intellectual strength, and men were both larger and had more testosterone, leading them to be more violent, aggressive, and stronger (think of 2 rams butting heads in nature over a female).

   But, these are all factors that are outdated and no longer necessary for survival.

2. **Patriarchal Religion:** Long ago, gods had different genders, and were often female, but then God as a man became prevalent around 4000 BC (and Eve was created FROM Adam’s rib), and Jesus was a man, etc. The hierarchy became God, man, woman, animals, and the environment—all created for the purpose of man’s use. [Question: Perhaps this was merely a SYMPTOM of the domination that was ALREADY in place—but admittedly one that probably helped to perpetuate that domination?]

3. **Scientific Revolution:** At least for man vs. nature, when everything moved to an atomistic/materialistic view of the world, philosophers (such as Descartes) portrayed nature as mechanistic (animals are merely “automata” or machines with no feelings, capacity for pain, etc.). G&G say, “According to this mind-set, nature was dead, inert, and mechanistic.” But, humans differ because they have SOULS.
**Moral Standing:** This whole time we’ve been sitting and passing judgment on what has moral status and what does not, based on dualistic-hierarchical thinking.

Cohen: “Either you’re a member of a species that exercises moral claims or you aren’t”

Singer: “Either you are sentient/can suffer, or you can’t”

Regan: “Either you ARE a subject of a life or you’re not”

etc.

And we assign rights to one category but not the other. Therefore, the traditional approach to environmental ethics is oppressive.

Environmental degradation, racist oppression, and sexist oppression all have the same root cause. (All of this can be seen through the lens of global economics, 3rd world debt, food production, militarism, and environmental racism)