

Ecofeminism for social justice and good living

Ecofeminismo para la justicia social y el buen vivir

Ecofeminismo para justiça social e bem viver

J. Félix Angulo Rasco

Catedrático de la Universidad de Cádiz. Cátedra Unesco Democracia, Ciudadanía Mundial y Educación Transformadora.

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6625-907X>

felix.angulo@uca.es

Guadalupe Calvo García

Universidad de Cádiz.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6390-6561>

guadalupe.calvo@uca.es

Abstract

Understanding the importance of ecological justice as a right for education, that is, for future generations, is the objective of this article. To this end, after emphasizing the importance that the Committee on the Rights of the Child has given to climate change, in connection with the right to ecological equality of all human beings, we briefly present some of the consequences of the Anthropocene on nature and the unequal impact of these effects on women and children. In this paper, we claim critical ecofeminism as a clear alternative to the Andro-Anthropocene capitalist system, as one of the most important supports for respect for nature, coexistence and, ultimately, affective justice; emphasizing the important ecological literacy that it advocates. Along with this, we point out the strong connection between ecofeminism and the ethics of care, which is an ethic of caring relationships and attention to others and to nature. Finally, we focus on the implications of the good living of indigenous peoples (the *suma qamaña*), as well as on the Earth Constitution. If the latter encourages us to save the earth and protect it constitutionally, the former tells us that the path to follow involves reconciliation in and with life and the care of the earth. Therefore, we conclude that ecological justice is fundamental for the education and training of future generations.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, ecological justice, social justice, ethics of care, climate change, good living, *suma qamaña*.

Resumen

El presente trabajo pretende mostrar la importancia que tiene la justicia ecológica como un derecho para la educación, es decir, para las futuras generaciones. Para ello, tras enfatizar la importancia que ha prestado el Comité de Derechos del Niño al cambio climático, enlazado con el derecho a la igualdad ecológica de todos los seres humanos, exponemos brevemente algunas de las consecuencias en la naturaleza del Antropoceno y el desigual impacto con respecto a dichos efectos en las mujeres y la infancia. En este trabajo reivindicamos el ecofeminismo crítico como una clara alternativa al sistema capitalista androantropocénico, como uno de los soportes más importantes del respeto a la naturaleza, a la convivencia y, en definitiva, a la justicia afectiva, enfatizando la importante alfabetización ecológica que propugna. Junto a ello, señalamos la fuerte conexión entre ecofeminismo y la ética del cuidado, que es una ética de las relaciones cuidadosas y de la atención al otro y a la naturaleza. Por último, nos detenemos tanto en las implicaciones del buen vivir de los pueblos originarios (la *suma qamaña*), como en la Constitución de la Tierra. Si esta última nos anima a salvar la tierra y a protegerla constitucionalmente, la primera nos señala que el camino a transitar supone la reconciliación en y con la vida y el cuidado de la tierra. Por ello, concluimos que la justicia ecológica es fundamental para la educación y la formación de las futuras generaciones.

Palabras clave: Ecofeminismo, justicia ecológica, justicia social, ética del cuidado, cambio climático, buen vivir, *suma qamaña*.

Resumo

Este trabalho visa mostrar a importância da justiça ecológica como um direito para a educação, ou seja, para as gerações futuras. Para o efeito, depois de sublinhar a importância que o Comité dos Direitos da Criança tem dado às alterações climáticas, ligadas ao direito à igualdade ecológica de todos os seres humanos; expomos brevemente algumas das consequências sobre a natureza do Antropoceno e o impacto desigual desses efeitos sobre mulheres e crianças. Neste trabalho reivindicamos o ecofeminismo crítico como uma alternativa clara tanto ao sistema capitalista andro-antropoceno, como um dos mais importantes suportes para o respeito pela natureza, a coexistência e, em última análise, a justiça afectiva; enfatizando a importância da alfabetização ecológica que defende. Junto a isso, apontamos a forte ligação entre o ecofeminismo e a ética do cuidado, que é uma ética de relações cuidadosas e de atenção aos outros e à natureza. Por fim, focamos tanto nas implicações do bem-estar dos povos originários (a *suma qamaña*), quanto na Constituição da Terra. Se este último nos encoraja a salvar a terra e a protegê-la constitucionalmente, o primeiro diz-nos que o caminho a seguir envolve a reconciliação na e com a vida e

o cuidado da terra. Concluimos portanto que a justiça ecológica é fundamental para a educação e formação das gerações futuras.

Palavras-chave: Ecofeminismo, justiça ecológica, justiça social, ética do cuidado, mudanças climáticas, bem viver, sum qamaña.

Introduction. Ecological justice as a right

On August 22, 2023, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child published General Comment No. 26 “on the rights of the child and the environment, with special attention to climate change” (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2023). It recognizes for the first time the impact that climate change has on these rights and, by extension, on the living conditions of children. The Comment also explains to governments how to act to protect these rights, drawing from the conviction that girls and boys deserve to live in a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. In this way, the need for an unpolluted future, a life in a healthy environment and a relationship, as Petra Kelly (1992) would say, tender with nature, becomes a matter of right.

As Ferrajoli (2019) has shown us, the principle of equality is the principle through which “we associate equal value with all the differences that make each person an individual different from all others and each individual a person equal to all others” (p. 13). It is a complex value that, according to this author, includes two different principles (p. 15). One, which we have just mentioned, consists of the equal value that it gives to all the differences that form the identity of each person and, by extension, of the human species. It should be a static, universal and immovable principle, that is, not subject to exchanges, haggling or the market itself. The second has to do with the disvalue associated with economic and material inequalities that limit and deny the equal value of differences. What does this mean? Inequality and, especially, what we could consider ecological inequality, associated with a different quality of life and relationship with the environment, denies the value of differences, of the diversity of subjects. In other words, closer to the rights of children, ecological inequality and unequal access to a healthy life in relation to the environment distort and nullify the meaning and application of the other rights of children. By introducing General Comment No. 26, we are not only expanding rights, but also the meaning of equality itself. Here we find, structured from rights and equality, the idea of Ecological Justice (Angulo, 2016): the right of children and adolescents to have a balanced and fair relationship with nature. But why was it necessary to make this observation to preserve a healthy environment?

The Anthropocene

Our era can rightly be called the 'Anthropocene Era' (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000; Zalawiewicz et al., 2008), that is, a post-Holocene era characterized by the enormous impact (geological, biotic and climatic) of Homo Sapiens on the planet; an impact that is causing a profound and probably irreversible deterioration of the planet (Klein, 2015). The damage we are causing to the planet, mainly due to the production and consumption models of the neoliberal capitalist society in which we live, is another way of disconnecting with and from the other. But in this case, the other is nature from which a large part of childhood is now completely removed. Louv reminds us that "although we often see ourselves separated from nature, human beings are also part of it (wildness)" (2005, p. 9).

The dimensions of the damage we are causing are immense. We have poisoned the sea, polluted the air and water; we have increased deforestation, and desertification has increased across the planet. For example, the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) report on *The State of the World's Forests*, published in 2020, indicates that forest area decreased from 32.5% to 30.8% in the three decades between 1990 and 2020. This represents a net loss of 178 million hectares of forests, an area similar to that of Libya.¹ On the other hand, the presence of 59 organic micropollutants from various chemical types has been detected in the water of 140 Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBA) in Spain.² This is, obviously, not an exclusive case in Spain, as some studies have pointed out: rainwater is contaminated worldwide.³

The need to intervene to reduce the negative effects of human impact on nature and the consequences of the climate crisis on people's lives was recognised by global institutions in 2015, when the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda was approved, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals. This international institutional program recognizes that the situation described does not affect all people in the same way. For that reason, an intersectional perspective is present in the goals proposed (Hill Collins, 1990, 2009, 2019), as climate change is more virulently harming those who occupy non-hegemonic positions (such as women and children).

¹ Let us bear in mind that forests are home to 80% of the planet's biodiversity, act as carbon dioxide sinks and release oxygen into the atmosphere, provide the organic infrastructure for numerous and diverse forms of life, are the source of income and livelihood for approximately 25% of the population, with a large part of the lands traditionally inhabited by indigenous peoples (<https://www.exaudi.org/en/deforestation-degradation-and-integral-sustainable-development/>).

² <https://www.csic.es/es/actualidad-del-csic/los-contaminantes-organicos-amenazan-los-ecosistemas-acuaticos-de-las-areas-de>

³ <https://www.agenciasinc.es/Noticias/El-agua-de-lluvia-de-todo-el-planeta-esta-contaminada-por-sustancias-quimicas-para-siempre>

In the second warning from Scientists to Humanity, signed by more than 15,000 scientists (Ripple et al., 2017), the deterioration of nature and natural disasters were also associated with the increase in poverty, precariousness and hunger in the world.

We are putting our future at risk by failing to control our intense but geographically and demographically uneven consumption of materials and by failing to perceive rapid and continuing population growth as the main factor behind many ecological and even social threats. (p. 1026).

In this sense, they added that it was necessary and urgent to “review our economy to reduce wealth inequality and ensure that prices, taxes and incentive systems take into account the real costs that consumption patterns impose on our environment” (p. 1028).

It is possible to rediscover inequality and the need for the value of equality associated with fundamental rights. According to the UN (2021), women “are the first to feel the effects of climate change when they have to travel increasingly longer distances to find what they need to feed their families” (n. p.). In addition, “80% of people displaced by disasters and climate-related changes around the world are women and girls” (n. p.). Likewise, pollution causes more damage to their health (Puleo, 2017). Alok Sharma, president of the COP26 Climate Change Conference, stated: “Gender and climate are deeply intertwined. The impact of climate change affects women and girls disproportionately” (n.p.), reiterating other philosophers and researchers such as Vandana Shiva (Shiva & Shiva, 2020; Nogales, 2017; Herrero, 2017).

Focusing on childhood, the Save the Children report (2021), *Born in a world in climate crisis. Why we must act now to guarantee children's rights*, highlights the harshness of the environmental context in which girls and boys born in 2020 will have to develop their lives, compared to that of those born in 1960. Today's children will witness “2 times more forest fires; 2.8 times more crop losses; 2.6 times more drought events; 2.8 times more river floods; and 6.8 times more heat waves throughout their lives” (p. 6). Puleo (2020) argues that environmental protection actions should not be aimed exclusively at preventing future damage, but also at protecting the most vulnerable living beings that are currently inhabiting the planet:

At this point in the environmental degradation, it is no longer just a matter of defending the rights of future generations (an objective that, without a doubt, remains correct and relevant), but of acting in defense of those who live in the world today, in particular the most vulnerable populations of impoverished countries and, among them, women and girls and boys, the first human victims of environmental devastation due to their close dependence on the local ecosystem. Also of non-human

animals, domesticated ones, whose lives are taken away on industrial farms, or wild ones that struggle to survive suffering from hunger, pollution, droughts, floods, fires and the merciless war of hunters. (p. 21).

Ecofeminism

In the face of environmental disaster and the climate emergency caused by the neoliberal-patriarchal-adultist-speciesist system⁴, which prevents the principle of equality from being put into effect by exacerbating inequalities between those who do not occupy hegemonic positions in society and depriving them of their right to a dignified life, ecofeminism is revealed as the tool, the path and the solution. Ecofeminism is an alternative to androanthropocentric neoliberal globalization (Puleo, 2020; Stevens, Tait & Varney, 2018). Alicia H. Puleo (2017) argues that:

In the face of neoliberal globalization, critical ecofeminism demands ecojustice and sisterhood. It is necessary to be very clear that if feminism wants to maintain its internationalist vocation, it must also think in ecological terms, since poor women in the so-called "South" are the first victims of the destruction of the natural environment carried out to produce luxury goods sold in the First World. (p. 213).

In 2011, Puleo coined the term "critical ecofeminism" to differentiate it from other ecofeminist perspectives that reject social and technological advances and many of the achievements of feminism and advocate a return of women to a supposed feminine essence or nature. As Simone de Beauvoir anticipated in 1949, "one is not born a woman, one becomes one," which implies that binary categories related to gender (man/woman or masculine/feminine) are social constructions that respond to the needs of the system. In this sense, Puleo points out that "being an ecofeminist does not imply affirming that women are innately more closely linked to nature and life than men" (2017, p. 210).

The fact that women are more involved in the care and defense of nature is not due to a feminine essence that grants them greater abilities for this task, but to the learning of gender roles that society has attributed to them: in the private sphere, taking responsibility for domestic tasks, caring for people in dependent situations (children, elderly and sick people) (Baththyány, 2020). "When these characteristics are combined with adequate information and a critical look at hegemonic discourses, the conditions are created to awaken their interest in the defense of nature and other living beings" (Puleo, 2017, p. 211).

⁴ Paul Preciado also accurately calls it 'petrosexoracial capitalism' (2022, p. 96).

In this sense, ecofeminism deals, in theory and practice, with the fact that women are the most affected by environmental deterioration and, at the same time, the most involved in the protection of nature.⁵ This is “an attempt to outline a new utopian horizon, addressing the environmental issue from the categories of patriarchy, androcentrism, care, sexism and gender” (2017, p. 212).

On the other hand, ecofeminism reminds us that, just as men occupy a hierarchically superior position in society to that of women, what is identified as masculine (what is rational, productive, generates money) also has greater value and social recognition than what is identified as feminine (what is emotional, reproductive, generates life).

Considering this social organization, Herrero (2013) urges us to remember that human life is not sustained independently, that human beings are dependent on nature and other human beings, and, in this regard, states:

The invisibility of interdependence, the devaluation of the anthropological centrality of the links and relationships between people and the subordination of emotions to reason are essential features of patriarchal societies: "the more links and emotions are devalued in social discourse, the more patriarchal the society is" (Hernando 2012: 136). (2013, p. 281)

Accordingly, he calls for "<<renaturalizing>> man, adjusting the political, relational, domestic and economic organization to the conditions of life, which are given by the fact of being part of the biotic community" (2013, p. 289). Going deeper into the field of the economy, due to the backbone nature of the system that it holds, it is necessary to link it to the maintenance of life and the well-being of people, which would imply maintaining certain productions and eradicating others, in addition to modifying the consumption patterns of those who are in more privileged positions, so that it is possible to distribute the finite resources of the planet and satisfy the vital needs of all people. For Herrero, this work "requires undertaking an important task of ecological literacy and the internalization of what it means to place the maintenance of life at the center of interest" (2013, p. 301). Finally, "working on the centrality of life aims to detach ourselves from the strong anthropocentrism of our culture and look towards a democracy of the Earth (Shiva, 2006) that is capable of integrating the condition of being eco and interdependent with just societies" (2013, p. 302).

⁵ We cannot forget that, as indicated by the Global Witness report (2024), during 2023, 196 women eco-activists were murdered, of which 166 were in Latin America (i.e. 85%). On the importance of ecofeminism in Latin America, see: Cunha-Giabbi (1996), Svanpa (2015) and Espejo, Grábalos and Bahillo (2021).

The need to care for others and care for nature

As Puleo (2011) reminds us, the different currents of ecofeminism are strongly connected to the so-called ethics of care. One of the key points to understand this theoretical perspective is the need to care for others and for nature (Angulo, 2022)⁶ can be found in Carol Gilligan's (1982) criticisms of Kohlberg's (1984/1992) moral stages, taken up and developed by Nel Noddings (1982, 2002). Kohlberg (1984/1992), based on the previous work of Jean Piaget (1974), described, based on his own research, the stages that make up his theory of moral development. According to Kohlberg, moral development unfolds through three levels (Preconventional, Conventional and Postconventional), each of which, in turn, is comprised of two stages. Kohlberg noted that these moral development structures were common to all human beings, but since his research was based on middle-class male subjects, he thought, when he applied it to women, that they suffered from a deficit in their moral development.

Carol Gilligan (1977, 1982, 1987) conducted her own studies, focusing on women and redefining the stages outlined by Kohlberg. For Gilligan, women use a contextual and narrative mode of reasoning, rather than a formal and abstract one: their moral conception is more concerned with the activity of care, based on responsibility for others and developing an understanding of the world as if it were a network of relationships. Gilligan questions the universalist justice of the great principles that annul and exclude the differences and the importance of caring relationships. Gilligan emphasized that the Postconventional period, for women, is not based on an idea of "universal justice", but on care.

Put in an extremely simplified way, while Kohlberg justifies an ethics of great principles, Gilligan emphasizes the importance of the ethics of care, of attention to the other, of caring relationships. Care is an ethic with a strong feminist value, she states that the requirements of protection, attention and help that, as human, fragile and vulnerable beings, go beyond the immediate subjects, and can and should be deployed to the ecological context in which we live.. This is recognized by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, which since 2022 has oriented its work towards the Care Society, one that "puts the feminist principle of sustainability of life at the center and recognizes the interdependence between people, the environmental dimension and economic and social development in a synergistic way. It includes self-care,

⁶ There is also an economic perspective on care processes that we cannot develop here. See for example Marçal, K. (2017), Durán (2018), Fraser (2020), among others.

care for people, for those who care and for the planet” (n. p.)⁷. Ecofeminism, therefore, is also justified by extending care to nature (Espejo, Grábalos & Bahillo, 2021; Stevens, Tait & Varney, 2018).

“Ecofeminism expands the set of subjects worthy of our moral consideration to the non-human world. We find again ‘attentive love’ in the epistemological opening to the living,” to the care of the environment (Puleo, 2011, p. 63). If the ethics of care is sensitive to the dependence of some on others, as Emmanuel Levinas (2001) emphasized, ecofeminism does the same, understanding our interconnection, and interweaving with nature and the imperative of its protection and care.

This same emphasis, between care and nature, is found in the perspective of liberation theology in Leonardo Boff (2012). “The human being, man and woman,” says Boff, “represents the conscious and intelligent moment of the Earth itself. Therefore, as humans, we are the Earth that feels, thinks, loves, laughs, dances and worships” (p.48). To inhabit the earth, then, means to recognize the *Dignitas Terrae* and therefore to recognize its rights: “If the earth is a living superorganism, it must have rights like all living beings, and we, humans, have the duty to respect and defend them” (p. 52).

The rights of the earth are not a new issue, but something that has historical roots. We have begun to understand that ancestral cultures had already developed in their own way this idea, that was expressed through the idea of good living.

Good living and the Earth Charter

The good life, the *suma qamaña*⁸ of the indigenous peoples of Latin America, proposes a new orientation for living (Farah & Vasapollo, 2011). The *suma qamaña* is the correct life, living in peace, living together in harmony, leading a sweet life or raising the life of the world with love. “Good living implies a holistic and integrative vision of the human being, inserted in the great earthly community, which also includes the air, the water, the soil, the mountains, the lakes, the trees and the animals” (Boff, 2012, p. 62).

⁷ <https://www.cepal.org/es/subtemas/sociedad-cuidado/acerca-la-sociedad-cuidado#:~:text=La%20sociedad%20del%20cuidado%20es,las%20necesidades%20relevantes%20para%20la>

⁸ Suma Qamaña is a concept aymara (Farah & Vasapollo, 2011, p. 44). In Quechua the synonymous expression of *sumaj kawsay* is used and in Guaraní *ñande reko* which means harmonious life (p. 67).

The *suma qamaña* aymara encourages us to reconcile ourselves in and with life, points out that well-being is only possible in the *ayllu*,⁹ in the community, in the ‘us,’¹⁰ in caring for the Earth. Care, understood in this way and in relation to the good life, implies a deep connection with the Earth and with all living beings (Xucuru-Kariri & Lima Costa 2020). This ancestral *Dignitas Terrae*, which reconciles us with our fellow human beings and with the Earth, has remained a tradition, only recently made explicit and claimed beyond the indigenous peoples (Boff, 2012; Xucuru-Kariri & Lima Costa, 2020).

In this context, the idea of an Earth Constitution recently proposed by Ferrajoli (2022) is extremely important, a constitution whose first objective is to confront and set limits on the “wild powers of sovereign states and global markets” (p. 127) in order to save nature and ourselves as living and active beings.

In its first article, the Constitution fully establishes the importance of the Earth and life for our well-being and survival:

The Earth is a living planet. It belongs, as a common home, to all living beings: humans, animals and plants. It also belongs to future generations... Humanity is part of nature. Its survival and health depend on the vitality and health of the natural world and of other beings, animals and plants, which together with humans form a family united by a common origin and by a global interdependence. (P. 138).

From its preamble, the Charter tells us that, in order to save the Earth: it is necessary to face the very serious problems in which humanity and living beings are immersed...

Determined to save the Earth and future generations from the scourges of unsustainable development, wars, despotisms, the growth of poverty and hunger, which have already caused irreversible devastation to our natural environment, millions of deaths each year, very serious injuries to the dignity of people and an infinity of unspeakable deprivations and sufferings... determined to live together, without exclusion of any, in peace, without deadly weapons... and to achieve equality

⁹ The *Ayllu* maintains and cares for its *Jakañas* (places where life develops) in the context of the *Qamaña* (ontological place of well-being) and the space of the *PachaMama* (the biosphere or ecosphere) (Farah & Vasapollo, 2011, p. 50).

¹⁰A key reference here is Levinas (2001), when he points out: “This rupture of indifference... is the possibility of one-for-the-other that constitutes the ethical event... the existential adventure of the other matters to the self before his own, and suddenly places the self as responsible for the other’s being” (p. 10).

in fundamental rights and solidarity among all human beings, assuring them the guarantees of life, dignity, freedom, health, education and the minimum living standards. (P. 137).

Therefore, the Earth Constitution cannot be understood without a reaffirmation of fundamental rights, as we pointed out at the beginning of this text, because, in the same way, the ecological crisis is a crisis of democracy and coexistence (Puleo, 2020, p. 85), so we could not change our way of relating to the Earth, and to nature, if we do not transform or ensure the transformation of the relationship with ourselves, reaffirming the need for fundamental rights and equality (Ferrajoli, 2019).

A constitution such as the one indicated here is not enough to the same idea and practice of good living. At most, both orientations are complementary, because although good living is a philosophy that has taken shape in the practices of current indigenous groups and in the struggle of many women in Latin America, the Earth Constitution has a clearly legal orientation and, based on European constitutional experiences, aims to extend the idea of defending nature as a universal framework. We cannot ignore the possible problems that a legal structure such as the one indicated has, especially in relation not only to its utopian sense, but also to its possible divergence from the daily practices of peoples who have spent years defending their relationship with nature, the *suma qamaña*. But taking all this into account, the Earth Constitution is a pertinent initiative that recognizes the importance of nature and offers a possible legal mechanism for its universal defense.

Conclusion. Ecological justice as ecojustice

We are therefore directly dealing here with eco-justice, which would be for Puleo (2011, p.41) a way of explaining and defending social justice, since it would assume the importance of understanding and encouraging the mobilization of disadvantaged populations and peoples to confront the environmentally polluting projects and activities that directly affect them. Within this framework are the demands of the adolescent and young girls and boys who have organized themselves in the Fridays for the Future movement¹¹, led by activist Greta Thunberg.

This mobilization is nothing more, we repeat, than the assumption of rights as human beings. It is about assuming the right for human beings to find our place again, here and now, with and in nature. And it is this right that we can call ecological justice (i.e. environmental): the right that every child has to a balanced and

¹¹ <https://fridaysforfuture.org/>

fair relationship with nature; the right, as Petra Kelly (1992) expressed it, to a tender coexistence with plants and animals.

Being tender and at the same time subversive: that is what it means to me, on a political level, to be green and act as such. I understand the concept of tenderness in a broad sense. This concept, which is also political for me, includes a tender relationship with animals and plants, with nature, with ideas, with art, with language, with the Earth... And, of course, the relationship with humans. (Kelly, 1992, p.27).

Ecological justice in school involves the realization of ecojustice through mutual care, the development of *suma quamaña*, of good living and of caring for our natural world. We have no doubt that school is the most important place in which to ensure the rights of the earth and peaceful coexistence in harmony with nature.

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