
Pachamama: The Impact of the Commodification of Nature on Women

Pachamama is a Quechua term, which stands, basically, for Mother Earth. The Quechua, an Indigenous People living in a large part of the Andes, believe that the Earth is a mother which cares for people as if they were her children.

The concept of ecological services is a very strange one, in this perspective. According to the concept of ecological services, the different functions healthy ecosystems provide to local people, like the provision of food, medicines, fuelwood, water and construction materials, and local climate mitigation, can be translated into monetary economics, turning local people who use these “services” into clients. Clients that will, one way or another, have to pay for these functions. It is like one enters a family and suddenly forces the children to pay for the care their mother provides.

Women have always played a fundamental role in the non-monetary “economy” of people. Much of their day-to-day employment is targeted towards caring for their loved ones, their children, husbands, parents. Like the functions of Mother Earth, these activities are very hard to translate into monetary terms. Yet, they are indispensable for human well-being.

However, neo-liberal biodiversity policy-makers are actively trying to impose the concept of ecological services upon people living within “Mother Earth’s care. These local people suddenly see themselves in a position where they have become the “clients” of ecoservices.

Water that used to be available to them - and used to be fresh - has suddenly become a commodity that has to be paid for, and paid for dearly. Due to water privatization, some families in Mali are now paying up to 60% of their income for freshwater alone!

Fuelwood used to be freely accessible to them, but with the privatization of forests, and the rapidly progressing conversion of forests into monoculture tree plantations, every branch has to be paid for nowadays.

Medicinal plants used to be and still are a fundamental source of health care for many rural families, but with biodiversity destruction reaching epidemic speed worldwide, many families have lost their access to medicinal plants, which means they have to rely on expensive commercial health services.

Bushmeat has become overexploited by commercial hunting, and coastal fish grounds are becoming rapidly degraded, with the only fishstocks left being sold to large commercial fishing fleets.

Even seeds, which are the result of generations of joint innovations of farmers, most of them women, are becoming rapidly privatized and monopolized. Large biotechnology companies are even introducing special terminator technologies, which ensure that farmers are unable to reproduce their own seeds. Meanwhile, it is the reproduction of seeds which has formed the engine behind the development of the world’s amazing agrobiodiversity.

As women are, in average targeting a large part of their daily work to non-monetary activities like

family care and unpaid care for people in their direct neighbourhood in general, they have a very disadvantaged position in the monetary economy. In many countries, women are still unable to participate fully in the monetary economy: they are unable to own real estate, they cannot get a mortgage, and they often cannot take a loan without permission of their husbands.

Worldwide, women are paid 30 to 40% less than men for comparable work. Meanwhile, women in developing countries work 60 to 90 hours a week, they provide 40 to 60 % of the household income, 75% of healthcare services, and over 75% of the food consumed throughout Africa. Even in the UK, the average full-time weekly earnings of women are 72% of men's.

Meanwhile, women are far more dependent on nature in their economic activities than men. In most countries, women are responsible for providing basic needs like freshwater, fuelwood and health care to the family. In most rural families they are also responsible for maintaining the family vegetable garden, and caring for small livestock like chicken, which form an important source of nutrition in the family. Men often work in paid labour or cash-crop production, and they are more likely to benefit economically from monocultures like export-oriented cash crops and even from logging.

The replacement of biodiverse systems by monocultures is a major cause of impoverishment of rural women. As most of their work is unpaid, it deprives them of their main source of income and makes them more dependent upon men. This diminishes their overall status in society and increases their vulnerability, including their sexual vulnerability.

The introduction of ecological services schemes adds even more to this problem. As women receive relatively little monetary income, they are unable to pay for basic needs like fuelwood and water. Due to their low status in many societies they are also less capable to negotiate on an equal level about access to so-called ecological services, thus leading to an even more disadvantaged position in the so-called ecological services market. The concept of ecological services has thus become a major cause in the further impoverishment of rural women.

Instead of trying to sell life and associated knowledge, we should address the direct and underlying causes of deforestation and other forms of biodiversity destruction. Only by challenging market-oriented approaches to biodiversity, and supporting the efforts of millions of women and men around the world to nurture nature and share the benefits of it, we can make any progress towards eradicating poverty amongst women and preventing ecological disaster.

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