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# Ecofeminism, Women, Environment, Animals

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by

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**Abstract:** Feminist thinkers, focused on moving toward sex equality, turned their attention to the root causes of sexism and the oppression of women. In the process, thinkers and authors such as Carol Adams, Josephine Donovan, Greta Gaard, and Marti Kheel unearthed common ground between feminists, environmentalists, and animal activists, connecting with and advancing a comparatively new school of thought, Ecofeminism.

## **Systems of Oppression**

In their quest to ascertain and expose the causes of sexism, feminists explored dualistic thinking and a tendency to form hierarchies. Over time, these ways of viewing and ordering individuals and the world came to be understood as foundational forces undergirding and backing sexism. Ecofeminists eventually pointed out that these same forces create and support *systems* of oppression that affect, among other things, women, the natural environment, nonhuman animals.

### *Dualism*

Dualism is a way of ordering the world through the use of opposites such as male/female, civilization/nature, and human/animal. Dualism fosters an understanding of the world whereby anything and anyone that/who does not qualify for a particular category is excluded from that category and becomes “other.” Dualism thereby divides living beings into two sex categories. All males are lumped together at birth based on visible protruding genitalia, and these individuals are considered separate and distinct from individuals who do not have protruding genitalia – “the opposite” sex. Dualism is evidenced in our English

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language: We do not have a gender neutral pronoun for humans, who are necessarily categorized as either male or female. In a similar manner “nature” is distinguished from civilization, culture, and human beings. Nature is that which is not affected by humanity, and to be human is to be civilized and cultured. This is further evidenced in our dualistic tendency to view humans as separate and distinct from all other animals. Dualism also divides mind from body and reason from emotion, treating each as distinct and separate.

These supposedly exclusive categories of male/female, nature/culture, and human/animal, do not properly reflect the complexity of the world in which we find ourselves. For example, though dualism holds that there are only two sexes, defined as 46, XX and 46, XY (46 chromosomes, 23 from the mother and 23 from the father, XX for females and XY for males), human beings come with a variety of karyotypes: 45, X; 47, XXX; 48, XXXX; 49, XXXXX; 47, XYY; 47, XXY; 48, XXXY; 49, XXXXY; and 49, XXXYY. Despite such obvious shortcomings, dualistic divisions of “male” and “female” remain the most fundamental methods by which we categorize human beings. Also problematic, we are neither separate nor distinct from nature or “other” animals: Humans are primates, mammals...animals. We are part of the animal world, and part of nature. Similarly, minds cannot exist without bodies and reason and emotion work together in any well-balanced human being.

### *Hierarchy*

Dualistic thinking is foundational in the Western world, as in many other civilizations. Through dualism, men, human beings, civilization, culture, mind, and rational thought are envisioned as holding a particular set of esteemed characteristics, relegating females, nonhuman animals, untamed wildness, bodies, the material world, emotions, and intuition to a separate and lesser category. In *The Pornography of Meat*, ecofeminist Carol Adams aptly uses the terms “A” and “Not A” to describe this dualistic categorization.

Feminists and ecofeminists noticed that dualism was not merely a division of individuals and things into separate but equal categories. Anything and anyone in the “Not A” category was considered *mutually interconnected and lesser*. Those envisioned as belonging to the “Not A” category are envisioned as being more closely linked with one another than with those in the “A” category: Women and nonhuman animals tend to be understood as more about bodies than minds, emotions than reason, and of course closer to “Mother” nature than are male humans. As an extension of this process, all things associated with those in the “Not A” category tend to be viewed as lesser and/or in a negative light, such as domestic work, menstruation, emotive responses, barnyards, paddocks, tails, and walking on four legs. In contrast, those in the “A” category are associated with all things considered good. For example, they tend to be heralded as the backbone of civilization and the epitome of reason and culture, evidenced by the fact that religious elites, powerful leaders, and those considered to be the finest artists and scientists tend to be male in Western societies.

Again, the English language supports this conclusion: Denigrating terms used to refer to women are often simultaneously used to refer to nonhuman animals,

including “cow,” “chick,” “heifer,” “kitten,” “hen,” “bidly,” “sow,” “kitten,” “cougar,” and “vixen.” In comparison, males have few animal-related references, and among these, a good option are positive, such as “stud” – a strong, virile, handsome animal who is generally held in high esteem in Western societies. In contrast, derogatory adjectives stemming from animal terms, such as “catty” and “bitchy,” are generally reserved for women. Men might be called “dog” or “pig,” but these terms can be a matter of pride rather than denigration, which is rarely the case with “bitch” or “catty.” Women are also visually connected with nonhuman animals, bodies (as opposed to minds), and nature when portrayed as sex objects such as the mermaid and the playboy bunny. Animals – especially those exploited as commodities – are depicted with distinctly feminine (“sexy”) physical traits, such as large eyes, batting eyelashes, smooth legs, and curvaceous bodies, as powerfully demonstrated in *The Pornography of Meat*.

### *Oppression*

Through dualism and hierarchy, individuals, attributes, and physical objects are separated into two distinct groups. One group, “A,” is given precedence over the other, which is formed by default – “Not A.” This results in a hierarchy favoring those in the “A” category, who thereby gain esteem, power, and control in relation to those in the “Not A” category.

This esteem, power, and control are reflected in sexism, anthropocentrism, and speciesism. Sexism oppresses women because they are women – not because they are inherently unworthy or lesser, but simply because they were not born with external, protruding genitalia. Clearly the nature of ones genitals is not a morally relevant difference such that men should be granted opportunities and powers that are denied those not born with external protruding genitalia. Similarly, anthropocentric people tend to assume that all things human – culture, civilizations, and humans themselves – ought to hold power and precedence over all things non-human – the natural world and all that dwells therein. Again, there is no morally relevant distinction between all-things-human and all-things-not-human such that the former ought to be held in more esteem or granted power and privilege over the latter. Nonetheless, all things human *have* been granted esteem in relation to all things natural, and as a result, it has been assumed right and proper that the natural world be viewed as “natural resources” for human use, and that humans exploit, control, and manipulate the natural world for their personal ends. And again, not-being-human does not constitute a morally relevant distinction such that all other animals are rightly exploited, controlled, and manipulated by and for human beings, yet humans have been granted precedence, and all other animals are, indeed, manipulated by and for human beings. Despite a lack of any morally relevant distinction between males and not-males, between human beings and their civilizations and the rest of nature, and between human beings and the rest of the animal world, males and humans hold place of privilege and power, controlling and manipulating others and the world around them. This is the definition of sexism, anthropocentrism, and speciesism: All beings and things that have been lumped together in the “Not A” category – women, nature, nonhuman animals – are

unjustly denigrated and oppressed by, on behalf of, and in relation to those in the “A” category.

This situation simultaneously invites and justifies “A” control. Those in the “A” category are apt to be thought to be *rightly* in charge, to *rightly* gain advantages, and to *rightly* exploit “Not A” individuals – to be sexist, anthropocentric, and speciesist. For example, if women are understood to be more about bodies than minds, and more about emotion than reason, it makes sense that males are favored for higher education and many job opportunities. It thereby makes sense that women be relegated to the home, domestic labor, reproduction, and to childbearing. If women are less cultured and less civilized, it makes sense that men control their lives. Similarly, if cows and chickens lack reason and culture, and are more about bodies than minds, they are also rightly controlled by those in the “A” category, and used for “higher” purposes by those in the “A” category.

Through this process “Not A” individuals are viewed as/become dependent on those in the “A” category. Women are viewed as/become dependent on men for protection and financial support; nature is viewed as/becomes dependent on human beings to cultivate and “manage” untamed wilderness (wildlife numbers, water flow, and wild fires, for example), and eventually to protect nature from obliteration; and nonhuman animals are viewed as/become dependent on human beings to “manage” (as in wildlife management), protect, and provide sustenance and medical care (domestic animals). In return for protection, management, and provisions, those in the “Not A” category are expected to service the needs of those in the “A” category - to cook and clean and provide sexual satisfaction, offer produce and grazing lands, and provide offspring, milk, eggs, and flesh, for example. Women, nature, and animals are all similarly envisioned as lesser, dependent, and as rightly controlled and exploited.

In fact, because “Not A” individuals are deemed irrational dependents, many in the “A” category feel justified in controlling those in the “Not A” category with violence. They feel, consciously or subconsciously, that an overlay of strength and culture and reason is *rightly* brought to those in the “Not A” category by those in the “A” category, and that women, nature, and nonhuman animals must be subservient and provide those in the “A” category in certain ways. As it turns out, even when those in the “A” category do not provide anything to those in the “Not A” category, “A” individuals maintain a sense of power and control over “Not A” individuals. Until recently it was not even possible for a wife to accuse her husband of rape; raping the earth continues to be legal; animal abuse is only starting to be recognized and treated as a serious crime (as reflected in more stringent sentences as we have come to understand that such offenders are also dangerous to human beings). Not surprisingly, domestic violence, harassment, date rape, and animal abuse remain stubbornly (and unnervingly) common.

#### *Women and Animals - Bodies for Exploitation*

Because they are more similar to one another than to a tree or a stream, parallels of oppression are particularly striking with regard to women and nonhuman animals. Those who hold power (“A” individuals) have a tendency to control and exploit female bodies, especially female reproductive biology – whether woman,

sow, cow, or hen. A husband's long-held authority over his wife, and her historic inability to accuse him of rape or to claim her children against her husband's will, exemplify "A" control over "Not A" individuals. Women and children have long been treated as the exclusive property of husbands- his woman, and therefore his vagina to access, his womb to fill, his sons born to carry on his name, lineage, work, and property. Similarly, those practicing "animal husbandry" envision cattle and pigs and turkeys as their personal property - their cow and sow, and therefore their vagina to access, their womb to fill, and their offspring to use for personal gain. Just as men practice "husbandry" with farmed animals, holding these individuals in a position of forced dependence, using their physical bodies for their own ends, impregnating them and claiming their offspring, husbands traditionally held wives in a position of forced dependence, used their physical bodies for their own ends, impregnate them and claimed their offspring. Many still do.

While traditional marriage provides ample evidence of "A" control over "Not A" individuals, sex trafficking is a particularly apt example of this phenomenon. Women caught in the web of sex trafficking are victimized *because* their bodies are viewed as a commodity that might be gainfully exploited by and for those in the "A" category. Women who fall victim to sex trafficking are exploited *because* they have a woman's legs, breasts, face, hands, buttocks, and of course a woman's vagina and womb, *and* because they are "Not A" individuals. As "Not A" individuals, they are viewed by "A" individuals as controllable and exploitable, as property, and some "A" individuals will purchase and thereby "own" a particular "Not A" individual. Usually such "property" is purchased for the explicit purpose of gaining access to a female body for sexual pleasure, and also for domestic labor.

Other "Not A" individuals are also purchased, and their bodies and labor exploited by "A" individuals who wish to gain access to female bodies for personal ends, usually profit. Like those caught in the sex trafficking industry, *farmed animals are exploited specifically because of their female biology*. Cows, pigs, turkeys, and hens are perpetually forced to reproduce by "A" individuals, for "A" individuals, and cows and hens are additionally exploited for their nursing milk and reproductive eggs.

#### *Cows in the Dairy Industry*

The "breasts" (teats, mammary glands, udders) and nursing milk of cows are owned, accessed, and controlled, for the sake of profit, by those who own and run dairy farms. Mammals only lactate after giving birth, so dairy farmers use what they term a "rape rack" to artificially inseminate cows, pushing their hand far up her vagina to forcibly impregnate her, resulting in a nine month pregnancy. When her calf is born, the farmer takes her baby away, despite the desperate mother's best attempts to defend her young, and despite her ongoing lament at the loss of her newborn. Her calf is sold for veal, or raised to be similarly forcibly impregnated and milked for dairy products. Bereft of her offspring, a cow bawls for days, but all the while machines are busy pumping her calf's milk, which will be sold as yogurt, ice cream, cheese, or milk.

Like women and girls caught in the sex industries, the stress and misery that cows experience on dairy farms takes its toll. Though cows can live twenty to even

twenty-five years in farmed animal sanctuaries, cows in the dairy industry are “spent” after just five or six years of forced impregnation, birthing, loss of a calf, and perpetual milking, at which time she follows her calves to slaughter, usually while pregnant. Because their bodies have been brutally exploited, they frequently arrive as “downers,” unable to stand or walk, and are drug or pushed off of transport trucks at the slaughterhouse.

Cows suffer on dairy farms because they are females – because they lactate when they give birth – and because dairy farmers feel entitled to manipulate and exploit female biology for personal profit. Dairy farmers profit from a cow’s mammary secretions, her offspring, and eventually from her body when she is sold for hamburger.

### *Chickens and the Egg Industry*

Like cows, hens are exploited specifically because of their female biology, because their bodies harbor and pass eggs for reproduction. When hens are mature and ready to nest, they pass eggs daily until they establish a clutch of eggs, which they then incubate until the eggs hatch. But of course this is not what happens with hens or eggs in the egg industry, where both are controlled and exploited by “A” individuals.

In the egg industry, eggs are hatched in a stark environment far from the mother hen. Instead of being hatched in the dark, under the warm fluff of her mother, and to the sounds of her mother’s clucking, a chick is hatched onto a hard surface under a bright and silent neon light. She will spend her entire life in an artificial setting, without the sky overhead or grass and dust underfoot, without fresh air or natural light, in close confinement with other hens. No doubt a newly hatched chick peeps for her mother, but her mother is perhaps thousands of miles away, and though the mother hen would no doubt love to fluff her feathers around her newly hatched offspring, she is not permitted to do so – if in fact she is even still alive.

The newly hatched chick soon finds herself moving along a conveyor belt, where males are scooped off the belt and either thrown into the trash (where they suffocate), or tossed into a grinder (alive) (where they are transformed into fertilizer). Roosters are of no use to the egg industry. No doubt the little new-born chick hears the desperate and dying peeps of the males as she continues down the belt, where she is roughly snatched, this time to be thrust into a machine that sears off a significant portion of her beak. From that day on she cannot eat naturally or preen her feathers properly. Debeaking is very painful, but is deemed necessary for hens trapped in such crowded, miserable conditions that they are likely to peck one another, perhaps even to death.

If she survives debeaking, the chick is placed in a gigantic shed with thousands of other chicks, where she is left to grow for five months. If she survives to sexual maturity, she is then placed in a battery cage about the size of a microwave oven, usually with five other hens, where she will remain, standing on wire in a tiny cage with four or five cage-mates, in a gigantic shed with 100 thousand hens, until she is sent to slaughter. Cages are arranged in long rows piled as many as eight high. Excrement from hens on top drops onto hens below. Over time her feathers become broken and filthy. Sometimes a cage-mate dies, and she is forced to live with a

corpse. Her flesh rubs on the wire cage, causing open wounds. Her lungs are damaged by ammonia that accumulates in the long, crowded, increasingly filthy shed.

The cage is designed to rob the young hen of her precious eggs, which roll away from her warm body and into a trough, and are transported for processing. For about a year the hen continues to lay eggs that roll away as soon as they are laid, frustrating every natural instinct. When her egg cycle begins to wane, the food in front of her cage runs dry. For one to three weeks the hen starves in her cage, alongside her cage-mates, in what chicken farmers call “forced molt”. The hens that survive live among and on top of dead and dying cage-mates. Those who survive are shocked into another egg-laying cycle as soon as their food is restored. Again the hen lays eggs daily which are taken from her. She is never allowed to nurture young, create relationships with her offspring, or share their companionship in a larger, natural community of hens and roosters.

Eventually her egg cycle wanes once more, and though she would naturally begin another cycle, given time, the industry does not wish to feed her when she is not laying. Especially given that her body can be sold. She is roughly pulled from her cage by a wing or a foot, by her head or tail, often breaking bones and dislocating joints, and is either ground up and sold as fertilizer, buried (perhaps alive), or trucked whatever distance is required to reach a slaughterhouse. If sent to slaughter, she will again be seized, this time to be hung upside down, legs secured in shackles. In this way she travels along the kill floor until someone slits her throat – or not, in which case she reaches the scalding tank alive, and is boiled to death.

A hen in the egg industry suffers all of this misery simply because she is born with female reproductive organs into a society – our society – where “A” individuals feel entitled to manipulate and exploit her body and her female reproductive system for their own purposes. As sexist men sometimes feel entitled to control and exploit women and girls, speciesist humans feel entitled to control and exploit farmed animals, invading vaginas and filling wombs, claiming (and exploiting) offspring, depriving individuals of their freedom, and ultimately taking their lives.

### **Shared Oppression, Shared Liberation**

Ecofeminists recognized and understood shared causes of oppression, such as dualism and hierarch, leading to overarching systems of oppression. Ecofeminists came to see that women, nature, and nonhuman animals are similarly devalued in relation to those in the “A” category, similarly controlled by those in the “A” category, and similarly exploited by and on behalf of those in the “A” category. Ecofeminists first noticed that female animals - whether women or cows or hens - were similarly devalued in relation to their oppressors, were often associated with one another as “Not A” individuals, and were similarly exploited by those in the “A” category, particularly in relation to their female bodies and reproductive anatomy.

In unearthing these parallels, ecofeminists came to see that it is inappropriate to seek to liberate only one oppressed group without concern for the many others who

are relegated to the “Not A” category, and who are thereby systematically oppressed and exploited by “A” category individuals. For ecofeminists who recognize linked oppressions, extricating just one oppressed group is a narrow and selfish response. In light of the systems of oppression exposed by ecofeminists, the task at hand was clearly one of uprooting common causes and dismantling these deep-rooted, pervasive systems of oppression.

In addition to feminism – in solidarity against the control and exploitation of females - there are at least five other compelling reasons to reject animal products:

1. To protect the environment.
2. To protect your health – heart disease, cancer, strokes, and obesity are linked with consumption of animal products.
3. On behalf of animals – refuse to take part in the suffering and premature death of farmed, hunted, or fished animals.
4. On behalf of human rights – refuse to augment world hunger (70% of U.S. grains and 60% of E.U. grains are fed to farmed animals while people starve).
5. Religious commitment – no religion encourages choices that contribute to any of the above.

### Summary

Women, nature, and nonhuman animals are similarly devalued, controlled, and exploited in the Western world, where it has long been assumed right and proper that women serve men as nurses, waitresses, and wives, that humans exploit, control, and manipulate the natural world, and that humans similarly control and exploit nonhuman animals. Most noticeably, women and farmed animals are manipulated and exploited because of their female biology in the sex industries (and often through marriage) as in animal agriculture.

Insightful ecofeminists simultaneously recognized that any attempt to liberate only those who look like ourselves – who are our species, for example – is not only selfish and narrow, but cannot succeed: women will not and cannot be freed from oppression and exploitation until overarching systems of oppression and exploitation are dismantled, systems that undergird *all* forms of oppression, including but not limited to sexism, anthropocentrism, and speciesism. Consequently, many ecofeminists adopted a vegan diet, refusing to support the egg, dairy, and flesh industries, and joined environmentalists and animal advocates, intent on helping to end oppression and exploitation in all of its insidious forms.