

Women building an Economy of Life

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The Economy of Life: Beyond the Marketplace

Though the economy is often reduced to what happens in the marketplace – financial investments, production, and the buying and selling of goods and services – it is, in truth, far bigger than this. The Economy of Life encompasses everything that sustains human wellbeing: the networks of care, the natural systems that support life, the social and ecological bonds that make communities thrive. It is the economy that provides – or should provide – or our basic needs and enable “life in fullness.” It is richer, deeper, and infinitely more wonderful than the narrow frame of markets and money.

Lessons from the Pandemic: The Visibility of Care

It almost feels surreal that the COVID-19 pandemic now seems like a distant memory. Yet, one of its most enduring lessons is the realisation that there exists a care economy – an entire realm of essential work that makes all other economic activity possible. When lockdowns and stay-at-home orders brought the global market economy to a standstill, it was the care economy – cleaning, cooking, raising children, tending to the sick and elderly – that accelerated to a near-frantic pace. While factories stopped and offices closed, homes became the centre of life, and care work became the glue holding society together.

But this work, vital as it is, remains largely invisible and unpaid. Globally, women perform three times as much unpaid care work as men (ILO 2018). In the Asia-Pacific region, women spend over four times more hours than men preparing meals, fetching water, collecting firewood, and doing essential daily tasks. In Sri Lanka, for instance, 87 percent of women and girls do household and care work, compared to only 59.7 percent of men and boys (Jayasekera 2021).

Even when women are formally employed, they continue to shoulder the bulk of domestic responsibilities and caregiving, especially in times of crisis. The result is a double or even triple burden – (underpaid) wage labour, (unpaid) domestic labour, and (unpaid) emotional labour – which deepens gender inequality and exhaustion.

Valuing What Sustains Life

Care work sustains workers, families, and communities every single day. It is a cornerstone of the Economy of Life – and without it, the market economy would collapse. Yet governments and economists rarely recognise or measure it. Oxfam (2020) conservatively estimates that women’s unpaid care work contributes \$10.8 trillion annually to the global economy – more than the combined revenue of the world’s largest corporations.

Feminist thought insists that care work must be acknowledged, valued, and supported – through public policy, social infrastructure, and a fair redistribution of responsibilities between women and men, between households, the state, and the private sector. Only then can societies achieve true resilience and equity.

Churches recognised this truth already in the early 90s, naming women's unrecognised and unremunerated social reproductive work as a critical global economic issue. The World Council of Churches' study on *Christian Faith and the World Economy Today* affirmed: *"Although such work is unpaid, it is nonetheless a crucial ingredient in the economy because it holds the social fabric of society and forms the base for many activities in the formal economic realm"* (WCC, 1992:25).

The Blind Spot of Ecology

If conventional economics is blind to care work, it is similarly blind to ecology. This is astonishing but true! It has been mentioned before that the very word *economy* shares its root with *ecology*: *oikos*, meaning "home" or "household." Both concern how we provision, sustain, and share our common home – yet mainstream economics behaves as if the natural world were infinite and self-repairing.

Women and nature have been treated similarly within dominant economic systems – invisible, devalued, and exploited as "resources" to serve production. As economist Julie Nelson (1995) observed:

"Production is defined as taking place using only factors of capital and labour... The bearing and raising of children, and the care of the aged and sick—traditionally women's responsibilities—are, like nature, too unimportant to mention."

This mindset – that both "women's (care) work" and nature are secondary and "take care of themselves" – has led not only to social burnout but also to near climate and ecological collapse. The undervaluing and denial of the daily care and provisioning done by women and of our complete dependence on biospheric processes lie at the root of today's crises. To build an Economy of Life, we must restore and affirm the responsibility of care and the interdependence between and among humans and ecosystems.

Feminist Economics: Exposing Power and Reclaiming Value

Feminist perspectives are critical for building an Economy of Life. Feminist economic thinking challenges the assumptions and power structures embedded in traditional economic thinking. Mainstream economics tends to treat the "factors of production" and the "economic order" as fixed and neutral – ignoring how power, privilege, and inequality shape economic outcomes. In reality, power operates everywhere: between rich and poor countries, between capital and labour, and between men and women. These dynamics – rooted in colonial history and social inequalities – determine who are the creditors and who are the debtors, who benefits from economic growth and tax breaks and who bears their costs, and even who lives and who dies. The Accra Confession names this power dynamics as empire. Feminist economists bring these forces into the light, insisting that economics and the economy must grapple with questions of justice, ethics, and care – not just efficiency and profit.

Feminist analysis also reminds us that inequality is never one-dimensional. Gender intersects with class, race, caste, age, and sexual orientation, shaping people's lived experiences and economic opportunities. Power operates across and within these categories, demanding that any analysis of justice be intersectional.

Ethics and Agency

Equally vital is the ethical dimension of feminist economic thinking. It places moral values — care, equity, sustainability, and dignity — at the heart of analysis, policymaking and community actions. For feminists, the central question is not merely *how to grow the economy*, but rather: *What do we, as societies, choose to value? How do we organize our economies to guarantee wellbeing for all?*

Faith, Justice, and the Economy of Life

Churches and communities of faith have a vital role to play in this transformation. Faith traditions remind us that the economy is not merely a technical system — it is deeply moral and relational. As the Accra Confession underlines, God’s economy, grounded in radical sharing, and care for creation, envisions *life abundant for all*.

Our biblical and theological resources challenge us to expand our understanding of justice, reconciliation and unity to include all creation — human and nonhuman alike. To speak of the Economy of Life, then, is to speak of faith in action: the pursuit of systems that nurture rather than exploit, that restore rather than deplete.

Reimagining the Future: The Doughnut and the Web of Life

Economist Kate Raworth’s concept of Doughnut Economics and post-growth/de-growth approaches capture this vision powerfully. Here, the goal of economic activity is to “meet the needs of all within the means of the planet.” Instead of economies that must grow to thrive, we need economies that help us thrive, whether or not they grow.

Indigenous communities reimagine the economy in terms of interdependent and interconnected relationships. This reimagining embeds the economy within society and the living Earth, reminding us that we are more than workers, consumers, or owners of capital — we are caretakers of each other and our shared home.

Holding It All Together: Gender, Economic, and Ecological Justice

As we move together in the Ecumenical Decade of Climate Justice Action and in our joint ecumenical advocacy for a New International Financial and Economic Architecture — whether at the Commission on the Status of Women addressing gender violence, at the IMF and World Bank calling for debt cancellation and tax justice, or at the UN Climate Conferences demanding reparations and climate finance — we must hold together the three inseparable dimensions of justice: gender justice, economic justice, and ecological justice. They are not separate struggles but intertwined threads of one moral fabric. Like in the film *“Everything Everywhere All at Once,”* they must be pursued together — everywhere, at all times, and in all spaces. Because one cannot be achieved without the other.

Our task, then, is both faith-rooted and strategic: to live, build, and witness to an Economy of Life — one that honours care, dismantles gender and other inequalities, restores creation, and brings about life in its fullness for all.