

# DESIGNING AN ECOFEMINIST UTOPIA

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## ABSTRACT

This article proposes an educational module that promotes the study of ecofeminism within product design in high education for ethical design thinking. Design materialises concepts and leads therefore to realities; accordingly, it is important to provide a design education that acknowledges the significant changes design could make when loaded with ethical values. Ecofeminism is a philosophical current that involves the intersectionality of feminism and ecology, concepts that encompass gender and sustainability. Ecofeminist politics work with a focus on women and non-human nature, with the aim of liberation from power interactions and marginalisation inside society structures, gender equality, and ecology. Consequently, an ecofeminist design perspective is committed to having a care-centric vision towards gender and environmental protection. This proposal presents a collaborative methodology using utopian theory as a creative strategy for learning. Utopia is the idealistic illusion of a perfect reality, thus, utopia as a vision can be the trigger to reflect on the paths our society should follow for further development. Furthermore, feminist utopia focuses on building the bridge between reality and illusion, thus, utopia is a precise cognitive act that could be a beneficial tool for design creation. Unifying ecofeminist philosophy and feminist utopian thinking, this paper presents an innovative way of working with ethical considerations in product design. Hence, it aims to improve the awareness of the need for a sustainable society in future designers, engaging them with some of the UN Sustainable Development Goals such as 5. Gender equality and 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.

*Keywords: Product design, feminism, ecofeminism, utopia, higher education, ethic values*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Taking into account the strength of design in society, ethics and morality should be incorporated into the education of future designers. Although educational environments usually provide moral learning in transversal competencies, it is nonetheless important to emphasise the reflection of ethical thinking in product design education to promote the consciousness of designers. In this proposal, I focus on two of the most important areas that currently require ethics in design thinking, ecology, and gender equality, both of them covered by the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

In the present day, there has been a shift toward sustainable strategies promoted by ecological thinking in product design; For instance, the engagement with the purpose of societal degrowth [1] has been embraced by various activists and academics, however, ‘growth as a paradigm needs to be sustained because it is the unquestioned basis for social security, labour markets, policymaking, citizenship, and corporate activities [2]. Therefore, design is not only challenged by the product's demand but also by the concerns and struggles of its socio-political context [3].

At the same time that product design establishes relationships between humans and the Earth as a production source, it can also determine human interactions. Traditionally, design has defined gender roles, stereotypes, and inequalities by making gender-specific products [4], yet we can always escape to utopia, away from the symbolic and oppressive role patriarchal society has set for us.

In response to this matter, this paper reflects on ecofeminism and how to use utopia as a methodology for socio-structural changes, thereby giving a possible answer to Cecilia Åsberg's wonders of ‘what kinds of ethics and critiques, arts and sciences, politics and methods, can account for the changes in spatial and temporal scales introduced by climate change, species extinction, the life sciences, or the emergence of the politics of Life itself’ [5].

## 2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDS

### 2.1 Product Design and Feminism

The Frankfurt kitchen, designed in 1926 by the Austrian architect Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, was an innovative design that proposed an efficient method for domestic tasks. In the context of the 1920s, women were trapped in the domestic sphere, thus to the kitchen, which is why Schütte-Lihotzky designed this kitchen from her feminist perspective. If women could do domestic tasks faster using this design, they would have more free time for themselves. However, although Schütte-Lihotzky's idea was to liberate women from domestic labour so that they might explore cultural or intellectual activities, in the 1970s and 1980s, feminist critics condemned her design for not being a feminist [6].

Feminism is a constantly evolving movement in favour of gender equality, thus, its needs change according to time, and this evolution also impacts product design. For example, if we look at menstruation products, they have been developed for the comfort of the user, at first the design of the napkin and later the tampon, later on, products such as the menstrual cup [7], and even panties with new highly absorbent textiles have been developed, both of the last engaging an ecofeminist vision due to their reusability capacity.

On the other hand, there are product designs that support the feminist movement. For instance, the tool that aids in women's sexual liberation [8], or designs that consider the female body anatomy. Moreover, some products have been developed to help protect women such as anti-rape products like FemDefence or Invi Bracelet, and mobile applications like Legal Fling [9].

However, many products still promote gender sexism or anti-feminism; A case study is the Pinky Gloves [10], created in 2021 by a group of German men, these pink gloves are designed so women can change their tampons or pads without touching menstruation. Instead of appealing to feminist needs, the product acts against feminism by promoting the stigmatisation of menstruation

Feminism and the realities it postulates require new products that support a new structure, and because of this, it is necessary to rethink product design. Additionally, when designing a feminist product, we not only have to think about whether the product fulfils the final goal or not, but also to reflect on how it achieved the goal.

### 2.2 Ecofeminism: A design perspective

Ecofeminism is the philosophical current that unites feminist ideology and ecology in a commitment to a sustainable and ethical society. In the words of the academic writer Karen Warren [11] 'Nature is a feminist issue, which might be the slogan of ecofeminism'. The term ecofeminism appears for the first time in the work *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974), by the writer Françoise Dieudonne, defining an ideology that establishes a connection between women and nature. This term is born from and in favour of the fight for the liberation of nature and of women, who have been devalued and exploited.

The first conceptualisation of ecofeminism was in the 20th century, a biological determinist relationship in which women are connected to nature by their ability to menstruate, give birth and breastfeeding was made. These early ideas are referred to as classical or essentialist ecofeminism, but their content has been evolving and acquiring new forms through different writers and authors such as Yayo Herrero (2016). She defends constructivist ecofeminism, which emphasises the historical marginalisation that both women and nature have suffered in a patriarchal society as the reason for the emergence of ecofeminism [12].

Ecofeminist politics explore new ways and dynamics that avoid dominance and subordination interactions that hinder justice for women and non-human nature. Both women's and nature's value has been defined in relation to profit and therefore with capitalist doctrine, with the subordination of their living rights to that which benefits production.

Greta Gaard argues that women and nature could not find their freedom without the liberation of the other, hence, feminism and nature need to establish a symbiotic relationship based on their cultural, anthropological, and historical connections [13]. Consequently, this revolution could change the relationship dynamics between genders and our relationship with nature [14].

For this liberation process that addresses gender inequality and the ecological crisis, the ecofeminist Rosemary Ruether proposes a 'radical reshaping' [15]. On that account, incorporating ecofeminist thinking in product design could play a crucial role in this revolution; through product design, designers can materialise ideologies into objects, so, they have the power to design the pieces for a sociopolitical structure transformation.

Within ecofeminism, is proposed a care-centric-vision [16]. This position considers that the main lynchpin of all our relations should be the understanding of caring to achieve inclusive and respectful equality. It can be said that product designers have an intrinsic relationship with customers since the conceptualisation and production of the designed product will have a repercussion on the customers, consequently, a care-centric-vision should be a value we should consider in the designing process. As design materialises concepts, and we conceive and understand the world in terms of that materialisation, promoting an ecofeminist perspective in education could enrich sustainability and gender equality ideologies.

### **2.3 Utopianism: Feminist utopianism reflection and practice**

Utopia is defined as the imaginary scenario of an ideal society; therefore, this product of an illusory reality is a cultural artefact [17] that contains the representation of the society that we are aiming to achieve. Accordingly, the information about a dreamed utopia could be used as a potential driver to lead the development of current society. The construction of a utopia, allows us to acknowledge which characteristics of society would have to change for a perfect future, hence, utopian thinking ‘reflects on politics and society, which seeks the perfect, best, or happiest form of society, untrammelled by commitments to existing institutions.’ [18].

Although the term utopia is often understood as a naive way to imagine the unattainable, thinking without the limits of reality, can also be a beneficial strategy if we analyse it critically. Using utopian thinking we can diagnose societal structural ills and distinguish the problems that exist today as well as the goals we want to achieve. Hence, it is on this last idea that feminist utopianism is focused.

Feminist utopianism is ‘situated, critical, and relevant to transformative politics, a view structured by embodiment’[19]. Instead of understanding utopism as a mere fantasy, feminism uses it as a tool for progressive thinking. Through utopia, we can conceptualise new structures and explore new gender dynamics toward equality. Furthermore, ‘to deprive feminism of its utopias is to depoliticize it at a stroke’ [20], as feminism fights for gender equality and against hierarchies of inequality. Thus, its hope rests in the belief in achieving that utopia. In the words of the feminist philosopher Seyla Benhabib, utopian thinking is ‘a practical-moral imperative’ [21].

Because of its values for progressive thinking, writers such as Ruth Levitas have researched utopia as a method for the reconstruction of society [22] finding different perspectives to use it as a tool. In this proposal, I focus on the two main concepts that synthesised the utopia theory: Utopia as a vision and utopia as a cognitive act [23]. Utopia as a vision refers to the idealistic picture in itself, the dream, and on the other side, utopia as a cognitive act is the action of utopian thinking, thus, the act of establishing connections between the illusion and reality to develop toward utopia. Feminist utopianism especially focuses on utopia as a cognitive act since it is the activist mindset that searches for a method to bring utopian thoughts closer to reality.

## **3 A PROPOSAL TO APPROACH ECOFEMINISM IN PRODUCT DESIGN HIGH EDUCATION: EDUCATIONAL DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

The ideas presented below are designed for an educational proposal focused on the reflection and materialization of feminist product design or the transformation of products that do not conform to a feminist ethic. This approach is based on an ecofeminist perspective and the use of feminist utopia as a strategic tool for design.

### **3.1 Pedagogical Methodology**

This proposal will benefit from the following methodological insights and tools; *collaboration, social constructivism, dialogical analysis and meaningful learning*.

Within the educational context, Maldonado [24] defines collaborative work as an interactive learning model in which students build knowledge together, combining skills and efforts to achieve common goals. We understand collaborative learning as a process in which all members acquire knowledge in a symbiotic relationship, giving and receiving feedback in cognitive construction. Therefore, collaboration has an inclusive perspective that takes into account the diversity of the individuals and, consequently, the plurality of their contributions to the group. This means that heterogeneous working groups could benefit the exchange of ideas and learnings being beneficial for the reflections of ecofeminism.

Through collaboration, sociocultural constructivism will shape learning, based on social interactions, interpersonal relationships, and culture [25]. For sociocultural constructivism, the use of dialectics is essential to understand a subject since interrelationships and contradictions are essential for its constitution. Accordingly, in our proposal we will build knowledge through dialogic analysis, which will be carried out collaboratively, generating a sharing network of enrichment [26]. Feminism, ecology, and ecofeminism are being redefined and transformed every day as a consequence of constant social development; collaboration is the key to exploring this ideology.

With this pedagogical stand it is proposed that the educator figure facilitates the activity instead of leading it; the educator is responsible for keeping an active and reflective environment during the sessions, hence, the students will explore the different sections of the module acquiring the learning progressively.

### 3.2 Designing ecofeminist products

Table 1. Example of a table

Section 1	Introduction to ecofeminism in product Design	Analytical dialogical analysis
Section 2	Utopia as a vision	Creative thinking
Section 3	Utopia as a cognitive act	Cognitive design practice
Section 4	Sharing and evaluation	Analytical dialogical analysis

#### 3.2.1 Section 1

This section is an introduction to the topic, which is expected to use dialogic analysis to explore the topic with the participants. The theoretical data will be used as a trigger to create discussion.

#### 3.2.2 Section 2

This section will be used to set off creative thinking. As we mentioned before, utopia as a vision refers to the idealistic society, in this activity utopia dreaming will be used as a method to find new scenarios, shapes, necessities, and consequently, new products of ecofeminism. This exercise aims to give the participants a secure space to fantasise about a new reality, and this illusory word would be materialised by drawing or constructing different sketches.

#### 3.2.3 Section 3

Following the dream, reflection comes. After participants have framed a perfect ecofeminist alternative reality, they would use design thinking to adapt those sketches and make those dreams come true. In this section, participants will be divided into small groups to have easier coordination. As feminist utopianism does, in this exercise participants would have to use utopianism thinking for progressive strategies, building the bridge to connect utopia and reality through design.

#### 3.2.4 Section 4

The last section aims to share the products that the participants have designed and the concepts that they have developed. It is important to use this section not only to assess the products but also to evaluate participants' interactions, thoughts, and feelings during the proposal. When this proposal comes to practice, it is important to emphasize students' desires and the possibility of them being actively involved [27], consequently, developing meaningful learning [28], learning through which the learner establishes a relation of interest that enables the non-trivial relationship between the new knowledge and the knowledge he already possesses.

### 3.3 Educational outcomes

This proposal aims to benefit students by providing them with the following outcomes:

- Reflection on sustainability in the interconnection of gender, economy and society from an ecofeminist perspective.
- Learning to work in collaboration for sustainability.
- Practising the outcomes of creativity as an enhancer of future designs.
- Reflecting on the impact of design on socio-economic systems and its repercussions.
- Understanding design as a tool against inequalities.

## 4 DISCUSSIONS

Although the concept of ecofeminism was born in 1974, its incorporation into educational spaces has not gone hand in hand with sustainability, as an example, an analysis presented in 2022 on 55 eco-social museums in Spain reveals how ecofeminism is not present in the majority of them [29]. However, in the last decade, the reception of ecofeminism in high education has been remarkable due to the qualities of its holistic perspective. A case study, conducted at the University of Valencia, Spain, shows how only three out of 188 pre-service teachers had any notion of what ecofeminism was, thus, the research proves how a module of ecofeminist reflection can positively impact attitudes towards sustainability [30]. In 2020, this same university carried out a study that presented creativity and ecofeminism hand in hand for the realization of educational stories, the students showed reflective and academic mastery, however, they lacked originality [31].

Dystopias such as *Yabará*, a novel written by Lola Robles which explains the complexity and importance of ecofeminism, vividly reflect the need for eco-social changes, indeed, further from the representation of the problems we need to respond with strategies for the solutions. Therefore, this paper believes in utopia as a visualization tool, in order to follow Jules Verne's steps, who in his book *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) devised the Nautilus vehicle, 18 years before its creation in 1888. Gert Selle already reflects on utopian design in the book *Ideologie und Utopie im Design* in 1973, a book that makes an overview of design history from social criticism and the aim of well-being [32], consecutively, for the analysis of the current systems, solar punk postulations could be the source of inspiration. Solar punk is the genre of utopia focused on eco-social sustainability, this genre is a branch of literary fiction that explores in its narratives technological futures based on sustainable scenarios [33], thus, these scenarios could be understood as the ideation of new futures.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

This proposal is a pedagogical project that enhances the design thinking of the participants and enforces an activist perspective to design. The paper promotes the need for an education that explores ethics and new possibilities to change this hierarchical world. Through ecofeminism, we can analyse the power relations that subordinate women and nature, and consequently, activate our consciousness to reestablish a new social dynamics system. This practice moves forward to solve two of the UN's SDGs, 5. Gender equality and 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.

The session Utopia as a vision was put into practice at Studentenes Feministiske Forening, the feminist student association at UiO, University of Oslo, the participants describe the workshop as stimulating and hopeful for the movement. In conclusion, this paper presents a methodology for the deep reflection of ethical thinking current product design demands. By implementing these ethical values in product design, we can materialize a sustainable vision, which engages feminism and ecology. This innovation proposal is one of the ways feminism and ecology can be introduced in higher education to promote sustainable design.

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