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# Good work? Sustainable work and sustainable development: a critical gender perspective from the Global North

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## ABSTRACT

Work has just recently been recognized as an important topic in the discourse of development. But often it stays unclear how work is related to issues of gender equality, an indispensable goal of sustainable development from its start. The article explores how gender and work is addressed in three approaches to work and sustainable development, which are currently discussed in the German language literature on this topic: in the current mainstream concept of the green economy and green jobs, in alternative concepts of degrowth or postgrowth societies and in eco-feminist concepts of caring societies. The critical discussion of these approaches leads to the argument that a fundamental reassessment and reorganization of the critical society-nature relationship and consequently a new conceptualization of sustainable work is needed.

## KEYWORDS

Sustainable work; green jobs; care; eco-feminism; gender equality; post growth

## Introduction

The consideration of gender issues has been an integral part of the international sustainability discourse from the outset (Agenda 21, Chapter 24; United Nation Division Sustainable Development [UN], 1992). The United Nation's fundamental goal – the creation of an environmentally and socially sustainable global economy and way of life – was reaffirmed in 2012 in Rio during the 20th-anniversary session of the 1992 Earth Summit that had placed the sustainable development discourse at the top of the global agenda (Littig, 2012). More recently, Agenda 2030 and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), adopted by the Assembly of the United Nations in September 2016, address gender equality explicitly as a goal (number 5) (UN, 2016).

While gender was recognized early on as part of the sustainable development discourse, the recognition of *work* as an important issue by the UN within the sustainability discourse is more recent. The turning point here is the promotion of *green economy* and *green jobs*, based on *green growth*, by several UN organizations (International Labour Organization (ILO), United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)) at the beginning of the global economic crisis that unfolded beginning in 2008 (Littig, 2017). More recently, the eighth goal of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2016) connects decent work and economic growth. On that view, the reconciliation of economic growth and environmental protection (i.e. the creation of a win-win situation), is meant to be the answer to the ongoing global socio-economic and environmental crisis.

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However, what often remains poorly defined or ignored in such scenarios is the quality of green jobs in general: to what extent do these constitute *good jobs*<sup>1</sup> or *decent work* as conceptualized by the ILO (2017a)? Moreover, from a gender perspective, it is necessary to ask whether and how many of the existing or planned *green jobs* are or will be jobs for women? What are the criteria for decent work? (ILO, 2017b) Do they include access by women, as well as other hitherto marginalized categories of people?

In light of the above, the overarching question I want to discuss is how the concepts of work and gender appear in different discourses on sustainable development. I do this in three steps: (a) I review the implications and consequences of the dominant discourses addressing work and sustainable development (green economy and green jobs) for women and gender relations; (b) I discuss alternative concepts of sustainability, such as those oriented towards degrowth and postgrowth societies, to identify both their blind spots and inconsistencies with respect to gender, as well as the opportunities they offer in gender terms; and (c) I discuss eco-feminist positions focusing on a fundamental crisis of care, i.e. the neglected need and recognition of female care work. On that basis, I close by arguing for a fundamental reassessment and reorganization of the critical society-nature relationship and thus for a new conceptualization of work. Throughout I will refer predominantly to the relevant debate in the German language because it is less visible internationally and has developed some ideas which are worthy of wider discussion.

## Dominant discourses of work and sustainability: green economy and green jobs

### *Green economy and gender*

The *green economy* has been considered, particularly since the 2012 Rio+20 United Nations Conference, as the advancement and realization of the concept of sustainable development that had been adopted two decades previously as the global guiding principle for the UNEP. The greening strategy builds on technical innovation and the efficient use of energy and resources, not least as a driver for growth and new jobs in a decarbonized economy and, thus, facilitating inclusion and eradicating poverty (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2011; United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, 2012). The current EU framework strategy also refers to the green economy: *Europe 2020* sees itself as a 'new strategy for jobs and smart, sustainable and inclusive growth' and prioritises resource efficiency, new jobs, and the eradication of poverty (European Commission, 2010). However, aside from common concerns about the foreseeable depletion of natural resources or the consequences of climate change and agreement on the use of fossil-based fuels, an understanding of the *green economy* and, above all, how to realize it, varies (Tienhaara, 2014; Unmüßig, Sachs, & Fatheuer, 2012). Nevertheless, the *green economy* has become a buzzword in recent declarations related to sustainable development (Littig, 2017).

However, its strategy to modernize fossil fuel (brown) capitalism has been brought into question (Brand, 2012). It has been argued that this strategy does not provide a solution to the socio-ecological crisis, since it does not take into account the major developments that reproduce and strengthen the fossil fuel-based capitalist economy, such as the global proliferation of a way of life based on the Northern model (defined by Brand and Wissen (2017) as the 'imperial way of life'), the problem of rebound effects (Santarius, 2014), land grabbing in the Global South, the increase in agro-industrial production (e.g. biodiesel) and the dominance of large-scale industrial and technological projects. All of these not only perpetuate social inequality and global injustice (Brand & Wissen,

2015) but also exacerbate ecological degradation and climate change by both destroying and reducing arable land, devastating rain forests worldwide and biodiversity.

Bauriedl and Wichterich (2014) define the *green economy* as a new hegemonic paradigm, aiming to manage the environmental crisis. It reconfigures power structures through the economization and monetization of nature, and the ecologization of the economy, including the gender dimension (Bauriedl and Wichterich, 2014, 7; see also Unmüßig, 2014). As Salleh, Goodman and Hosseini argue, the *green economy* ultimately uses new means to perpetuate capitalist exploitation (e.g. ecosystem services and patents on genetic codes), and with it control over nature and people, without being able to resolve society's critical relationship to nature (Salleh, Goodman, & Hosseini, 2016). However, as will be discussed below, the feminist criticism does not necessarily mean that the *green economy* – interpreted as a greening of all economic activities – should be rejected completely from a gender equality perspective (Genanet, 2011) but, rather, that regarding gender issues and gender equality, the green economy scenarios are unsatisfactory. As Bauhardt (2014) points out, reproductive work in private households is not even considered. Research has shown that care and housekeeping in private households is mainly done by women (OECD, 2014). Since it is unpaid and takes place outside the public sphere, it is usually not even regarded as work (e.g. in the calculation of the GDP).

### **Green Jobs = good jobs? – and jobs for women, too?**

Although the green economy and the green jobs discourses are closely related, in as far as they do not question the dominant structure of capitalist production and embrace 'green growth', they do emphasize different aspects of a '*green economy*'. While the former deals with the technological aspects of a green economy, the latter aspires to solve the problem of job losses due to industrial transformation from a brown to a green capitalism.

The UNEP-funded report 'Green Jobs: Towards Decent Work in a Sustainable, Low Carbon World' (UNEP, 2008) constitutes a milestone in the international green job initiatives. It provides estimates of the expected global increase in green jobs in those sectors viewed as particularly relevant from an environmental perspective and uses a broad definition of what constitutes a green job<sup>2</sup>:

We define green jobs as work in agricultural, manufacturing, research and development (R&D), administrative, and service activities that contribute substantially to preserving or restoring environmental quality. Specifically, but not exclusively, this includes jobs that help to protect ecosystems and biodiversity; reduce energy, materials, and water consumption through high efficiency strategies; de-carbonize the economy; and minimize or altogether avoid the generation of all forms of waste and pollution. (UNEP, 2008, p. 3)

Given the 200 million unemployed people worldwide, high youth unemployment, continued poverty despite employment, and social exclusion (which affects more than a billion people around the globe), the creation of jobs is seen as the primary means of resolving a growing social inequality and its threat to social cohesion. Accordingly, proponents of the *green economy* state that investments in environmentally and climate-friendly technologies and infrastructures have the potential both to create 60 million new *green jobs* by 2030 and to transform existing jobs into *green jobs* (Poschen, 2015).

Even if the numbers are realistic, the question as to the quality of such jobs remains. The few available studies on the quality of *green jobs* indicate that this modernizing win-win strategy is extremely challenging to implement (Clarke, Gleeson, & Wall, 2017; Leitner, Wroblewski, & Littig, 2012).

*Green jobs* are spread across industries and sectors, where working conditions differ greatly. In Europe, the measurement and operationalization of green jobs usually refers to the EUROSTAT-defined Environmental Goods and Services Sector (EGSS), which broadly includes goods, technologies related to environmental protection and resource management (EUROSTAT, 2016). A study on the working conditions and employment potential of *green jobs* in Austria, for instance, concluded that green jobs are very heterogeneous. In the public debate, the image of green jobs is that they are held by trained experts with environmental qualifications and good working conditions. This image corresponds mostly to the situation in the energy supply sector, which accounts for only 6% of all green jobs. However, the majority of green jobs are found in sectors with poor working conditions, e.g. agriculture and forestry, construction and trade (Leitner et al., 2012). An investigation of the situation in the USA reaches a similar conclusion, painting an ambivalent picture of *green jobs* (Mattera, 2009). The authors of this study used case studies to identify sectors where low incomes dominate and there is no labour representation, as well as those in which the expected ‘good, middle-class jobs’ were to be found, and concluded that: ‘[g]reen jobs are not automatically good jobs. We have to make them so’ (Mattera, 2009, p. 6).

From a gender perspective, the green jobs discourse is less wanting than the green economy discourse. Since gender equality has been an explicit ILO goal for many years, this is also addressed and recommended as a matter for special attention in its *green jobs* progress reports.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, a recent ILO Policy Brief on ‘Gender Equality and Green Jobs’ (ILO, 2015) stipulates that without a consistent gender mainstreaming ‘in all aspects of development, sustainability in a green economy is inconceivable’ (ILO, 2015, p. 1). So far, however, the gender-related effects of the ‘*green jobs initiative*’ have not been studied systematically in either the Global South or the Global North. The cited Policy Brief notes the limited availability of gender-disaggregated data on *green jobs* and a recent comparative study on female employment in the renewable energy sector confirms that the statistical basis is still insufficient (Baruah, 2017).

Good *green jobs*, which usually call for a technical or scientific qualification, are not only fewer in number but also primarily taken by men. This has been shown by new case studies on the low energy construction sector and the renewable energy sector in the Global North (Baruah, 2017; Clarke et al., 2017). Women remain in the minority in these fields of education and work and have to assert themselves under male-dominated working conditions (Cohen, 2017). The potential for women to find work in the renewable energies sector can be enhanced through education, raising of awareness and motivating interested women, employers, and interest groups (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund Bezirk Berlin-Brandenburg [DGB Berlin-Brandenburg], 2011; Röhr & Ruggieri, 2008).

When it comes to *green jobs*, women are employed above all in sectors where the working conditions are poor and the qualification demands and income levels are low, that is to say in the segments of trade, tourism and, to some extent, agriculture, that are controversially defined as green, according to the EUROSTAT EGSS statistics (Leitner et al., 2012). But it is not just in these sectors that a fundamental improvement of the quality of jobs is needed to make them decent.<sup>4</sup> Particular attention is paid to the discussion of ‘good work’ in trade union circles in terms of the different living and working conditions of men and women. Key issues here include the multiple loads on women as a result of their work and family commitments, the high share of women employed in emotionally and physically stressful areas of the services sector and at lower levels of the hierarchy, the limited freedom and flexibility afforded by such jobs, as well as the frequently discontinuous employment of women.<sup>5</sup> A range of accompanying measures are also needed to make *green jobs* attractive to highly qualified women ranging from measures to increase the number of girls and women studying technical and science subjects and entering such professions, gender mainstreaming in this segment of

the labour market (Röhr & Ruggieri, 2008), the gender-equitable distribution of decision-making functions, the promotion of work-life-balance and the transformation of the male-dominated culture of work (for details see Kuhl, 2012, pp. 12ff.; DGB, 2011). Aside from a few exceptions, such gender issues are, however, rarely broached in the *green job* propaganda.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to sceptical assessments of the size of the *green jobs* market, i.e. the quantity of *green jobs*, it should be added that the *green economy's* predicted growth potential depends to a large extent on favourable legislation and corresponding public subsidies. Cutbacks in 2012 led, for instance, to insolvencies in the German solar and wind energy sector. The effects of the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change (COP21) on the production of renewable energy sources cannot yet be predicted. Many experts are sceptical about how quickly the declarations of intent can be implemented and even consider a strengthening of the fossil-fuel based economy to be plausible (Schellnhuber, 2015).

### Critical discourses: work is more than gainful employment

During the past 15 years a critical discourse on environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable development has emerged, distancing itself purposefully from the concepts of *green economy* and *green jobs*. It has broached the consequences and prerequisites of a sustainable reorientation of the current societies based on paid employment. While only a few isolated studies (e.g. BUND & Misereor, 1996; BUND, EED & Brot für die Welt 2008) had previously questioned this basis (paid employment) – and had essentially considered it as a marginal topic – research into the links between sustainable development and the transformation of work has now become significantly more widespread and heterogeneous. One thing the different threads in the debate have in common is the guiding principle of a socio-ecological *stakeholder society* (activity-oriented society) that no longer focuses solely on paid employment. They do, however, differ significantly in their reasoning and design. In the following, I will present three central approaches to a socio-ecological stakeholder society and discuss their consequences from a gender standpoint: (a) approaches which advocate an expanded concept of work, (b) approaches based on a critical view of growth, and (c) (eco)feminist approaches which argue for a paradigm shift in economic activity towards care.

### Expanded concepts of work

The 'Work and Ecology' project commissioned by the Hans Böckler Foundation (2001), a research foundation with close ties to the Confederation of German Trade Unions, was one of the first to focus systematically on a redefinition of work in a sustainable development context. Its concept of *mixed work* (a translation of the German term *Mischarbeit*) can now be seen as a reference model when it comes to depicting an alternative, sustainable concept of work (HBS, 2001):

Mixed work is the combination of different activities with different formal principles and demands that result in a set of mixed qualifications and mixed workloads. Ultimately, the mix of different types of work provides a combination of different incomes (mixed income), which ensures a form of social security that is not based solely on paid work, but is derived instead from several sources and could form the basis for a general basic income for the members of a society. (Hildebrandt, 2003, p. 390, translation author)

The German study did not gain much international recognition, but remarkably 15 years later the UN Human Development Report (UNDP, 2015) presented a definition of *sustainable work*, which resembles the expanded notion of *mixed work*. Alongside paid work, this also includes care



work, work in the home, voluntary work, and work in the community. The concept of mixed work meets the long-standing calls from feminist women's studies and gender research for the unpaid care work and work in the home that is done primarily by women to be recognized as work that is necessary to sustain a society (Littig & Spitzer, 2011). The recognition of civic engagement as actual work has so far not played a large role in the feminist debate but does feature in Haug's (2008) *Four-in-One-Perspective*. Haug's standpoint as a Marxist feminist foresees that one-quarter of the 16 hours, we are on average awake should be spent on each of the following four activities: paid work, care work and work in the home, political engagement, and personal development. The concept

is concerned with the task of emancipating the areas of both producing the means for life through waged labour, and privately/publicly organised social reproduction, from their hierarchical positions within capitalism – and to include the neglected areas of self-realisation and political action to which each individual is likewise and equally entitled. (Haug, 2008)

This approach is similar to the *mixed work* concept, but goes beyond a purely work-related perspective because it emphasizes the aspect of individual self-development. While Haug does not establish any direct connections to the sustainability discourse, the *mixed work* concept combines findings from the field of the sociology of work on post-Fordist developments with normative sustainability principles and advocates, as it were, a change in the principles that guide work and labour policy on two counts (HBS, 2001). In this sense, *mixed work* enables us to analyze current work-related trends in society and, in particular, the increasing flexibilization and subjectification of work and the widespread erosion of the so-called normal (male) working relationship. Based on this analysis – and with reference to the sustainability paradigm of multidimensional distributive justice – the 'Work and Ecology' project defines a set of normative principles for social sustainability. These include having a self-determined way of life, civic participation, equal opportunities, the environmentally friendly satisfaction of basic human needs, the possibility of personal development/fulfilment and the maintenance of good health (Brandl & Hildebrandt, 2002). The realization of social sustainability with *mixed work* as its roadmap requires specific measures at the political level, the most prominent of which are a socio-ecological tax reform and a general reduction in (paid) working hours (to 25–30 hours per week) to achieve a redistribution of work.<sup>7</sup>

Even though the project, first published in 2000, has meanwhile become a reference point, at least in the German-speaking world, it failed to stimulate a socio-ecological discourse in the German trade unions as intended by the authors and the commissioners. Nevertheless, the analysis of changing post-Fordist working conditions combined with socio-ecological issues and its transdisciplinary research design can still be judged as innovative and groundbreaking (Brandl, 2016).

### Critical approaches to growth

While at the turn of the century the links between sustainability and work were still only looked at in isolated cases – like the aforementioned project – interest in the topic has since grown considerably in light of the more recent growth-critical analysis of capitalism (Barca, 2017). Indeed, given the multiple recent crises, several prominent sustainability researchers in the social sciences are basically calling into question the continuation of the dominant primary alignment on full-time work in times of increasing economic growth and rising social inequality (e.g. Dietz & O'Neill, 2013; Jackson, 2016; Seidl & Zahrnt, 2010). Their reasoning is based above all on the facts that a decoupling of economic growth and resource and energy consumption has not been achieved, that the prevailing use of fossil-based energy sources accelerates climate change, and that purely technical solutions alone are

inadequate from a global perspective for resolving the environmental crisis (Fischer-Kowalski & Haberl, 2007; Schor, 2010). One of the reasons for this is that of the rebound effects, which undo the relative savings by increasing energy consumption in absolute terms through increased consumption (Santarius, 2014). As a consequence, these experts are calling for clearly reduced (if need be selective) economic growth, a general reduction in paid working hours (they do not agree on whether this should happen on the basis of the same wage), an expansion of the concept of work and a sufficiency-based consumption (Winterfeld, 2017). Yet opinions in the sustainability community on the question of growth are by no means unanimous (for an overview, see the articles in Lessenich & Dörre, 2014). They range from recommendations for increased or moderate growth to endorsements of zero growth and the transition to a degrowth or post-growth society (Latouche, 2006; Schor, 2010; Seidl & Zahrnt, 2010). Despite the heterogeneity, the fact remains that the discourse on the limits of growth has now clearly gained in relevance, in both research and in public and political circles.<sup>8</sup>

Gender considerations do not always form part of the critical debates around growth (Bauhardt, 2014). However, the demands for shorter working hours, a broader concept of work including paid and unpaid work, and mixed work, do at least take up the extensive insights gained over the years in women's studies and gender research (Sorger, 2014). Especially with the reduction of working hours the double burden for women (paid work obligations and care work in private households) could be reduced. There is also some hope that in the case of a general worktime reduction the distribution of reproductive work could be shared more equally between the sexes. But as the following paragraphs on socially innovative experiments show, this does not happen automatically.

Addressing the environmental and social consequences of the capitalist growth paradigm is motivating a multitude of social movements and civic initiatives to search for alternative forms of living and working as a possible solution to socio-ecological problems (Petridis, Muraca, & Kallis, 2015). These include various forms of cooperative economic models and alternatives ways of living and working together, like those practiced in solidarity-based economy projects (Altwater & Sekler, 2006), the transition town movement,<sup>9</sup> the Ecovillages,<sup>10</sup> the subsistence economy (Bennholdt-Thomsen, 2006) or urban community living projects. Such social experiments are considered highly important, in particular in the transition research context (Brand, 2016). They are seen as 'pioneers of change' and are referred to in a corresponding report by the German Advisory Council on Global Change as vanguards of a major transformation process (WBGU, 2011). Whether they can actually live up to this attribution still remains to be seen, but is, in any case, a topic for debate (Jonas, 2017).

The main question from a gender perspective is how do such projects contribute to gender equality and how is the traditional assignment of roles and division of work between men and women changed or reproduced in these alternative initiatives of living and working projects. Equally, to what extent do these projects take care work into consideration or even reorganize it? At present, the discourse on this topic relates primarily to concepts and theories (e.g. Bauhardt, 2014), and empirical findings are still scarce. One exception is the research on urban housing projects. When these projects are explicitly designed for women, a strong emphasis is placed on renouncing the traditional gender hierarchy (Becker, 2007).

Collective living arrangements in which people live in individual units within a housing complex and share a range of common facilities (kitchens, saunas, workshops, etc.) are gaining relevance in urban areas. Community living is an option that is chosen above all by families or singles as an alternative to living alone or as a nuclear family. It is also linked to expectations of support in reproductive work, in particular, the mutual raising of children. Twenty-five years ago Schneider (1992)



established that while this does occur, it is done to a far greater extent by the women in the various set-ups, than by their male partners. This finding was also confirmed by a recent study of a housing project in Vienna (Leitner & Littig, 2017). This shows that sustainable ways of living together, an environmentally friendly way of life and a commitment to collective work in the community do not automatically go hand-in-hand with a change in the traditional gendered division of labour.

### Eco-feminist positions: care as a normative guideline for economic activity

Feminist positions fall principally within the discourses critical of growth (Barca, 2017; Bauhardt, 2014; Biesecker, Wichterich, & v. Winterfeld, 2012). The necessary revisions of the dominant, narrower concept of paid work in favour of an expanded alternative that includes the elevation of the status of care work that is provided predominantly by women, reduction in working hours and redistribution of work are all supported from a feminist perspective. A reduction in working hours is also considered a prerequisite for gender equality (Sorger, 2014). From an eco-feminist perspective, this is an important first step towards a gender-equitable socio-ecological transformation (Adam, 2013). Overcoming the fundamental externalisation of the costs and prerequisites of capitalist economic activity at the expense of nature and women ultimately requires a basic reorientation of economic activity, namely a focus on the principle of care (Biesecker et al., 2012; Biesecker, Mathes, Schön, & Scurrall, 2000; Fraser, 2016; Schildberg, 2014). *Care* in the sense of caring *for*, caring *about* and making *provisions* is understood in the feminist debate to be the basis of human existence:

On the most general level, we suggest that caring should be viewed *as a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible.* That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (Tronto, 2013, p. 19; italics in the original)

Care in a sustainable development sense means caring for both current and future generations and demands a (re)orientation of the market-mediated money economy away from abstract value creation towards an economic and work purpose that serves the realisation of the goals of life and focuses on social cooperation and care in all forms of work (i.e. the totality of work required by society) (Jaeggi & Kübler, 2014). The socio-ecological transformation towards a sustainable work society cannot be gender-blind and has to see the current gendered division of work as a patriarchal relationship of power between men and women (Bauriedl & Wichterich, 2014).

The notion of a care-oriented economic activity forms the basis of many of the eco-feminist system-critical proposals that were already discussed at the sustainability summit in Rio in 1992 and again at the anniversary summit in 2012, where feminist groups from the Global South, in particular, called for an economy of *livelihood* (survival) (Harcourt, 2012).<sup>11</sup> Common to these approaches is a fundamental questioning of the maximization of capitalist profits and a demand for the preservation of reproductive ability and the integrity of nature. These require not only appropriate and adequate economic activity but also a visionary blueprint for society. Three central threads can basically be identified in the feminist debate: (1) the reappraisal and redistribution of the work that is necessary in society, (2) the adoption of a solidarity-based approach to common goods like education, social security, health, mobility and an intact environment (beyond neo-liberal privatisation and marketisation), and (3) the departure from the growth paradigm of capitalist economic activity, which comes above all at the expense of nature and is based on social and economic inequality between the north and the south (Wichterich, 2012, p. 44ff.). Researchers and activists in the Global North have taken up the guidelines formulated in the Global South for a 'buen

vivir', a 'good life for all', and a life 'that provides sufficient material goods and services for all people' (Cohen, 2017, p. 9).<sup>12</sup>

The base line of eco-feminist approaches state that social equity, gender equality, and environmental justice must be at the heart of sustainable development, having been demanded from the very beginning of the debate on sustainable development in Rio 1992 (Agenda 21, Chapter 24; UN, 1992). Recent feminist declarations have advocated the use of the term 'sustainable and equitable economy' rather than 'green economy' to tie in directly with and strengthen the decisions made in Rio 1992 (Women's Major Group, 2011). A discussion paper published by a network of German women's organizations has presented an extended definition of the green economy concept:

Our understanding of a green economy means prioritising a socially and environmentally just society and a corresponding economic system that will facilitate a, good life for all'. [...] Thus, it is essential to acknowledge the multifaceted and productive care work that is overwhelmingly performed by women, as well as the productivity of the natural environment, as the basis of any economic activity. (Genanet, 2011, p. 1)

### An overview and concluding considerations on sustainable work

The sustainable work approaches referred to in this paper contain very different notions of the development paths that should be followed in the future. Of these, both the *green economy* and the alternative working and housing projects advocated by new social movements (like degrowth, solidarity economy, etc.) are on the rise in practical terms. The debate on an expanded concept and a redistribution of work, however, is still far more a discourse among experts than a discussion in the public realm.<sup>13</sup>

One reason for the current lack of public awareness for these expanded concepts of work might well be that they do not prioritize the prevailing central relevance of paid work in all its functions. While the questions of income security and welfare arrangements are discussed fairly extensively in most of these approaches, they pay significantly less attention to the psychosocial functions of paid work and its relevance for civic integration. If paid work continues to decline as the sole source of these functions, and they are to be realized through unpaid work, a fundamental sociocultural change and new forms of meaningfulness will be required. How this change should be set in motion and who should promote and carry it are aspects that are not addressed in the majority of studies.<sup>14</sup>

The threads in the discourses mentioned in this paper are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but they are developing alongside and against each other. Gender issues are usually marginalized in most sustainability-oriented scenarios, except of course from a care economy perspective. If they are addressed at all, they are often simply an add-on and do not form a substantial component of the respective approaches. But there are at least some isolated efforts underway to change this situation. These include the Human Development Report 2015 by the UNDP (2015), which examines the relevance of work in its complexity for human development and consistently addresses gender differences (UNDP, 2015, p. 30 and Chapter 4). The report is innovative in its gender, work, and environmental policy demands. This is also evident in its definition of sustainable work, which includes types of work that promote human development, contribute to sustaining the planet and are also sustainable for future generations. For this to be possible, incompatible jobs will have to disappear or be transformed, and new forms of work will need to be created (UNDP, 2015, p. 18). The report does not, however, systematically link work, gender, and environmental policy. The debate on 'sustainable work' is only just evolving and thus the notion of 'sustainable work' is still vague (Barth, Jochum, & Littig, 2016). But the gendered perspective of work as a particular societal nature

relationship is indispensable, since a working society without legal and actual gender equality cannot, in any case, be sustainable.

The promotion – conceptually and practically – of sustainable work first of all needs a strong cooperation between the socio-ecologically engaged actors of the labour movement and the work-oriented actors within the environmental movement, a left mosaic alliance as it has been called by Urban (2009). And such an alliance needs to be gender sensitive too. This exists already and has great potential if it is systematically enforced, as recently studied in the Austrian case (Brand & Niedermoser, 2017). If the different interest groups move beyond their particular diagnosis of problems – increasing social inequality, unjust distribution of wealth, climate change and environmental degradation, the marginalization of care, rising nationalism and right-wing political movements – and see these issues as interlinked elements of the overall multiple crises of current capitalist development, the need for a fundamental great socio-ecological transformation towards a more sustainable and equitable society becomes evident. This transformation needs to envisage an alternative to the mainstream capitalist *green growth* and *green job* strategy. From a feminist point of view, it needs to go beyond a female ‘catch-up with men in their society’ (Maria-Mies & Vandana Shiva ct. in Cohen, 2017, p.8). Care based eco-feminist positions have laid the ground for such an alternative approach of ‘a good life for all’, which implies ‘good work for all’ as well (Littig, 2016).

Following the normative principles of sustainable development – particularly the right to live a life in dignity and socio-ecological justice – and incorporating the findings advocated from eco-feminist gender-studies, the sociology of work and sustainability studies, the main characteristics of sustainable work are as follows:

- Sustainable work facilitates mixed work options for men and women (paid work, community work, caring and family work, and self-providing/self-educating work);
- Sustainable work allows for a self-determined sustainable way of life for men and women;
- Sustainable work guarantees long term (physical and mental health) and enables a healthy lifestyle;
- Sustainable work demonstrates a secure, sufficient and fair remuneration structure for men and women (income and transfers);
- Sustainable work strives for the ecologically and socially compatible production and supply of goods and services (a general greening of the economy).

The central prerequisites of sustainable work as a new leitmotif for the socio-ecological transformation of current working societies are working-time policies aimed at the reduction and flexibilization of working hours (20–30 h new full-time) and a socio-ecological tax reform to enhance socio-ecological production, products and services. The furtherance of these programmatic ideas could form a concrete project for a gender-sensitive left mosaic alliance.

## Notes

1. In 2006 the Confederation of German Trade Unions (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, DGB) has initiated the ‘Good Work’ Index (DGB-Index ‘Gute Arbeit’), the basis for a representative survey (DGB, 2017).
2. See also the current description of green jobs provided on the ILO homepage, Retrieved from <http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/green-jobs/lang--en/index.htm>
3. cf. 2009 ILO General Assembly; c.f. Report VI on Gender Equality at the heart of decent work, §12

4. It should be mentioned that the political approaches to determine and realise improved quality jobs, which were still a topic of discussion at the beginning of the century, have now faded into the background (Schröder & Urban, 2010).
5. The DGB's 'Good Work' Index takes up these threads and endeavours to serve as corresponding assessment tool for the quality of work in Germany. Retrieved from <http://www.dgb-index-gute-arbeit.de>
6. Such exceptions include, for instance, LIFE e.V., the feminist association of education institutions in Berlin (Röhr & Ruggieri, 2008), the European Greens (cf. Kuhl, 2012) and the DGB (DGB Berlin-Brandenburg, 2011) with its 'Renewable energies, an employment market for women' project.
7. Some researchers go a step further and see a half-day society as necessary to attain sustainable production and consumption patterns (e.g. Stahmer, 2005).
8. For example, the 3rd International Conference on 'Growth in Transition' organized in February 2016 by several Austrian ministries, public administrations, NGOs and research institutions as well as the announced 4th conference in November 2018, Retrieved from <http://wachstumimwandel.at/>
9. Retrieved from <http://www.transition-initiativen.de/>
10. Retrieved from <http://gen.ecovillage.org/de>
11. Cf. the feminist demands for the Rio+20 UN Conference (Women's Major Group, 2011).
12. Cf. the 'Final Declaration of the Peoples' Summit in Rio+20 for Social and Environmental Justice in Defence of the Commons, against the commodification of life' that was signed in 2012 in Rio. Retrieved from <http://rio20.net/en/propuestas/final-declaration-of-the-people%E2%80%99s-summit-in-rio-20/>. The universalistic claim has also been taken up in the Human Development report 2016, which postulates 'Human Development for Everyone' (UNDP, 2016).
13. This might probably change as a result of digitalisation (keyword: Industry 4.0) if – according to some forecasts – digitally networked value creation and the increasing rationalisation of jobs releases workers on a massive scale (Matuschek, 2016), thereby introducing a totally new set of dynamics to the debate on reduced working hours, albeit not necessarily for environmental policy reasons.
14. Fritjof Bergmann repeatedly stressed that finding meaning outside paid work and determining 'what one really, really wants' is a difficult and at times tedious task (Bergmann, 1997).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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