Feminist Geography: A Brief Introduction

By

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Feminist geography is a sub-field within human geography that relies on gender and place-based analyses to more fully understand the interface between human and natural environments. By applying the methods and theory of feminist thinking and critique to study the ways in which cultural processes interact with the biophysical environment feminist geographers often focus on the ways that socially constructed gender roles and gender identities help to define and are, in turned, defined by local cultural and physical realities.

In this way feminist geography recognizes gender-specific ways of knowing and is particularly interested in the ways that the meanings of local environments are constructed through these gender-specific ways of knowing and the lived experiences of women in particular places. This approach consciously turns away from the traditional social and natural science method of limiting academic research to the universal and objective features of culture and nature. Feminist geographers have generally rejected this later approach as containing a masculine bias inherent within patriarchal ways of knowing.

Central to all feminist scholarship is the assumption that traditional patriarchal ways of knowing, complete with masculine bias, have devalued and concealed women’s perspectives, thereby leading to unequal and unjust institutions and social policies. Feminist scholarship in the social sciences and in geography works to reclaim this diversity of perspectives.

As feminist geographical analysis has developed, scholars have become increasingly interested in differences among and between women, whether addressing women’s lives in one place or comparing women’s lives in different cultures and different places. Furthermore, feminist geographers have come to realize that gender analyses need to be supplemented with place-based, class, and ethnic analyses.

The challenge to Western feminist analysis came from women in the Global South, who criticized scholars from the United States and Western Europe, especially, for essentializing feminism and women, and for not paying enough attention to differences among and between peoples and places around the world. The three
pieces included here illustrate the importance of considering geographical context, as they illustrate (among other things) differences in cultural context and socioeconomic class.

The three papers included in this issue are examples of feminist geographers’ approaches to the analysis of particular cultural phenomena in specific places, with a focus on how place shapes the materiality of people’s lived experiences. Two of the papers examine the influence of gender on men’s and women’s access to resources, i.e., jobs in St. Kitts and transportation in Portugal. The third uses a feminist lens to examine capitalist development in Philadelphia, a medium-large city in the United States. Although the three articles presented here may seem unrelated, even widely disparate, they are linked by a common starting point and a common intent. All the authors approach their topics from a feminist perspective in order to reveal the importance of place at a variety of scales, from a particular neighborhood to a small island to a country. All three pieces are descriptions of empirical studies grounded in feminist theoretical perspectives and feminist methodological approaches.

Massaro’s paper on capitalism and community development contrasts with the other two papers in that it does not focus specifically on gender or on the lives of women and men. Rather, the author uses a feminist perspective on capitalism to analyze its effect on a particular neighborhood, using that neighborhood to illustrate how community activism re-shaped the effects of economic development. Massaro’s approach critiques economic scholarship that assumes capitalism as inherent and placeless. She firmly positions capitalist development in place, and focuses on community activism and empowerment. In so doing, she shows how community activism can create new and alternative means of social production, reproduction and organization.

Clarke and Barker examine women’s lives as they adjust to the changing local economy on the island of St. Kitts in the Caribbean. The paper is interesting at the variety of scales within which it is contextualized, from the individual women struggling to adapt to a new local context that demands a new and unfamiliar skill set, to the larger and rapidly-changing global market for sugar. The authors use feminist methodological approaches (e.g., ethnographic interviews, focus groups, participant-observation) in order to understand women’s lives and gender roles in the sugar district of St. Kitts. They use a “sustainable livelihoods” approach as the framework to build understanding of how gender roles in the local context respond to changes in the global.

Queirós and Marques da Costa present an analysis of transportation as a gendered phenomenon, rather than the gender-neutral one it has been assumed to be.
In the specific geographic context of Portugal they make the case that in order for transportation planning to be useful, it must be informed by an understanding of gender roles, and particularly an understanding that households are spaces of gender divisions, that productive and reproductive labor shape men’s and women’s daily lives, along with their needs for and access to transportation, in distinctive ways.

These three papers use approaches that, although applied in different places to distinct issues, illustrate similar intents; that is, all three seek to reveal the rich texture of life in specific geographical contexts. For example, Queirós and Marques da Costa illustrate that transportation must not be seen as gender-neutral; Massaro shows that capitalist development must be considered as intricately entwined within local context; and Clarke and Barker emphasize the gendered nature of changes at the local and global scales. All three are linked by concern for people’s interactions with their environments and by the feminist perspective that focuses on inclusivity.

1 As a side note, Massaro draws heavily on the theoretical work of J.K. Gibson-Graham, to whom she refers as “they.” Gibson-Graham is the pen name of Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson, long-time feminist economic geographers and collaborators until Graham’s death in 2010. They are best known for their books *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Blackwell, 1996), and *A Post-Capitalist Politics* (Minnesota, 2006).