

How can the intersection of gender and commons perspectives establish a new framework for action for development actors?

In recent decades, significant progress has been made in connecting gender and commons issues, both in academic approaches and in concrete initiatives. Gaining a better understanding of this literature and these new forms of intervention not only enables a theoretical reassessment of development policies, but also helps bring attention to innovative operational approaches.

A theoretical and practical movement toward convergence

Over the past ten years, the concept of the commons has been widely advanced by social movements. In his article on “The Tragedy of the Commons” (1968), Garrett Hardin posited that only the privatization (meaning the market) or nationalization (meaning the state) of a common resource could ensure both its profitability and renewal. Yet alternative forms of governance and institutional arrangements are conceivable, ones anchored in the communities that use these resources. The work of Elinor Ostrom (1990), in particular, paved the way for potential intersections with other domains (such as ecology and digital technologies) and issues (such as climate change, social norms, and social interactions).^[1]

The concept of the commons explores the boundary between private and public space, as well as the role of communities and traditional knowledge. It thus opens up questions around gender-based inequalities and discrimination, and around feminist perspectives and practices. Yet a truly intersectional perspective on these issues remains to be developed, as commons theory and practice have yet to fully integrate gender issues, and *vice versa*.

[1] On issues related to the commons in Africa, see in particular Leyronas, Coriat and Nubukpo 2023.

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Shared characteristics in the history of ideas and sociopolitical dynamics

For a long time, economic theories regarded the collaborative management at the heart of the commons as inefficient, thereby justifying their marginalization. At the same time, the trend toward the dismantling, appropriation, and commodification of the commons has unfolded as a continuous process, from medieval enclosure^[2] to the spread of contemporary market systems. Exclusive ownership has become the dominant paradigm in the privatization of public services, life forms, knowledge, and data.

Gender, along with its systems of domination, inequalities, and allocation of roles—including the division of labor—has likewise long been overlooked or insufficiently considered in economic analyses. Feminist theories have challenged the figure of the calculating and self-interested *Homo oeconomicus* by giving prominence to attributes such as empathy and cooperation, which resonate with the principles of the commons. They have also exposed the lack of critical thinking around the conditions required to exercise this idealized rationality, always conceived and articulated from a male-centered point of view. Yet practically speaking, the commodification of women's bodies and their confinement to the domestic sphere and a "reproductive" function have, for centuries, formed the backbone of economic, social, and political organization, as well as collective practices under the aegis of patriarchy.

The concepts and theories of gender and the commons thus share a critique of the ambiguous role played by public policy, and in particular family policy, which has long upheld women's subordinate position in the domestic sphere. Since the 1960s, however, a series of reforms has brought about significant progress in women's political, civil, economic, and social rights.^[3] Yet this structural evolution remains incomplete due to persistent anthropological resistance that helps explain the enduring, and at times deepening, of inequalities. Similarly, states have at times pursued privatization or nationalization policies related to the commons, undermining social dynamics. Debates around gender and the commons are inherently political, with divergent definitions and applications of concepts that often give rise to tensions and controversy.

Three analytical perspectives to enhance operational practices

Perspective no. 1. Highlighting the structural inequalities influencing the management of the commons

Certain practices in the management of the commons are prejudicial to women, who may be excluded—either totally, partially, or intermittently—from governance processes. These are practical issues that arise and should be addressed during the design or evaluation of development projects to avoid perpetuating or exacerbating existing inequalities. For example, when defining bundles of rights, a number of questions emerge: Are rules negotiated in a gender-balanced setting? Do women have equal access to decision-making? Is their participation mediated through family representation or direct individual involvement in the governing community? Are governance rules in the commons structured to promote equality? Do they ensure equal access to resources for both men and women? Are women overrepresented among users and underrepresented among owners, and how does this intersect with social background?

Box 1. Fishing communities in Mexico

In Mexican fisher communities, women tend to exploit resources less than men, owing to regulatory measures and sanctions. Increasing women's role in decision-making processes, alongside the establishment of a supportive institutional framework, could enhance the sustainability of resource management practices. "We provide evidence for a greater cooperative attitude in women compared to men in both college students and coastal fishing communities of Baja California, Mexico, by means of game theory experiments. In both laboratory and field experiments, women changed their behaviour towards lower extraction compared to men, when regulations, sanctions or social scolding were introduced in the games. These results suggest that raising the role of women in decision-making, along with an adequate institutional framework, may lead to a more sustainable use of resources." (Revollo-Fernández, Aguilar-Ibarra, Micheli and Sáenz-Arroyo 2016, 912).^[4]

[2] Enclosure refers to the appropriation of resources or spaces intended for collective use by private owners or states. This could be for commercial purposes (such as land confiscation for market exploitation) or legal ones (such as the patenting of seeds).

[3] Citizens hold civic (or political) rights, foremost among them the right to vote, while civil rights apply to individuals (such as the right to freedom of expression or the right to privacy). Social rights are an extension of human rights that justify state intervention in the economy (for example, the right to decent work, education, and housing).

[4] Daniel Revollo-Fernández, Alonso Aguilar-Ibarra, Fiorenza Micheli, and Andrea Sáenz-Arroyo. 2016. "Exploring the Role of Gender in Common-Pool Resource Extraction: Evidence from Laboratory and Field Experiments in Fisheries". *Applied Economics Letters* 23 (13): 912–920. DOI: 10.1080/13504851.2015.1119786.

Perspective no. 2. Identifying social spaces and modes of production marked by gender inequality

This second perspective builds on the first by extending to private spheres, such as domestic work and the care economy,^[5] framing the commons as a political model for transforming gendered hierarchies and power relations. The commons are thus no longer viewed merely as collective resource management methods, but as a set of political principles that critique hierarchies and forms of oppression made visible by gender.

Box 2. Commons of care in Colombia

In Colombia, the care economy—which boils down to “who provides care, how, and under what conditions?”—has become a national priority. In 2023, care was formally recognized as a human right and care work, largely reliant upon emotional labor and carried out exclusively by women, was reframed as a collective, not merely individual, concern. This led to the creation of the Ministry of Equality and Equity and the establishment of Care Blocks (*manzanas del cuidado*) in Bogotá. These public schemes, however, remain insufficient and many formal and informal collectives of varying sizes continue to meet care needs across the country. One such example is PEPASO (*Programa de educación para adultos del Sur Oriente de Bogotá; Adult Education Program of Southeastern Bogotá*), a foundation created in 1980 by a group of mostly young women students in Bogotá, offering adult literacy programs, popular schools,^[6] nursery schools, and community kitchens. In this context, treating care as a common good rather than a public good means fully integrating these care initiatives into public policy and recognizing their contribution to the overall economy, and more specifically to the care economy. This requires more than simply outsourcing the implementation of programs defined by the state or municipality to these communities, or promoting the delegation of public services in which the delegated public authority alone defines activities based on its own assessment of needs. Instead, a new relationship between public authorities and communities must be reimaged, one that fosters horizontal management and ensures the protection of care as a commons.

Perspective no. 3. Positioning the commons as vectors of gender equality and emancipation

This perspective explores how the commons can advance gender equality, and, conversely, how processes of nationalization and privatization have dismantled commons managed by women,^[7] thus undermining their economic position and curtailing their rights, such as their decision-making power and control over resources. Taken further, this perspective interrogates the global economic and political system, particularly North-South relations, which lend themselves to decolonial and ecofeminist analyses. It rests on the understanding that the oppression wrought by capitalism and that wrought by patriarchy are inextricably linked.^[8] To guide the design and implementation of development interventions, this approach can be formulated as follows: How can expanding the commons serve as a response to the dual oppression faced by women and the environment, particularly regarding biodiversity loss, the exploitation of natural resources, and the erosion of local and empirical knowledge—often transmitted by women—in favor of technical expertise?

Box 3. In India, seed commons to counteract the effects of the green revolution

In the 2010s, food prices in India rose at a rate of 18 percent per year. In response, 5,000 Dalit^[9] women across 75 villages in Andhra Pradesh created a seed commons based on traditional millet varieties. These had been largely abandoned in the 1960s with the arrival of exotic crops that were more vulnerable, required heavy pesticide use, and were sensitive to fluctuations in global agricultural markets. By relying on principles of sharing, borrowing, and exchange, the women managed to gather enough seeds to revive traditional polyculture, which involves sowing six or seven different types of crops in the same plot, providing a form of “eco-insurance” against variations in rainfall. The communal seed system came to symbolize their emancipation and the regeneration of their ecosystem. This transformation did not arise from technology transfer or agronomic research programs, but from the women reclaiming their own knowledge and embracing social collaboration and seed exchange.^[10]

[5] The care economy applies economic concepts and methods to the medical and social care sectors, enabling assessment of the cost and impact of health on the overall economy, household and government budgets, business management, and social policy.

[6] As in, schools rooted in the model of popular education—education of and by the people.

[7] Many agricultural commons, including some managed by women (such as subsistence vegetable farming), have been destroyed in West Africa due to campaigns to securitize land that prioritize exclusive public or private ownership over collective use.

[8] From this perspective, the work of the Tunisian reformer (*molish*) Tahar Haddad (active 1920–1930) is a key reference. Regarded as a “thinker of emancipation,” he explored the conditions of workers, peasants, and most notably that of Tunisian Muslim women, identifying the dual forms of domination the latter endured. A political activist and unionist, his book *Imra’atunā fī sharī’a wa’l-mujtama* (Our Women in the Shari’a and Society) (1930), which was met with fierce criticism upon publication, would go on to significantly influence later social policies. For a comprehensive account of his groundbreaking body of work, see Baccar, Gherib. 2019. *Tahar Haddad. Une pensée de l’émancipation*. Tunis: Diwen Éditions.

[9] The Dalits, also known as the “untouchables,” are a social group considered to be outside the caste system. Historically assigned to tasks or occupations deemed impure, they continue to face widespread discrimination owing to their perceived lower social status.

[10] On this subject, see: David Bollier. 2014. *Think Like a Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Commons*. New Society Publishers.

Informing public policy dialogues

In light of recent academic research (Périvier 2023) and the gray literature produced by development agencies and local stakeholders, this analysis seeks to understand how the intersection of gender and the commons influences practices on the ground. The three perspectives outlined may serve as a blueprint for developing normative frameworks to guide the design

of operations and advocacy initiatives. As Forest (2023) argues, it is crucial “to adopt a new framework for action and evaluation, based on the systematic integration of gender aspects into the analysis of commoning practices.” By informing operational frameworks and public policy dialogues, research findings can thus help address more concretely the major transformations shaping today’s societies, chief among them environmental, urban, and digital transitions.

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