

GENDER, RISK, AND THE PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE

JULIE NELSON*

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS - BOSTON.

The Precautionary Principle, adopted by many who respect the complexity of natural environmental systems, suggests that we should adopt an attitude of caution when dealing with natural systems. It recognizes that our knowledge is limited, and that disaster could result from ignoring feedback dimensions of such systems. Such a cautious approach is, of course, anathema to many orthodox economists, as well as policymakers who follow the orthodox lead—much to the detriment of sensible environmental action.

Could an association of such care and caution with (disrespected) femininity be part of the cause of the rejection of the Precautionary Principle? This essay will review recent writings on risk and the environment that contrast gung-ho-ism with a more motherly or grandmotherly attitude, and will also review (and critique) recent economic writings associating differences in gender with differences in risk preferences. It will be argued that appropriate precaution is best seen as a human, rather than distinctly feminine, capability, whose suppression is linked to dualistic and biased cultural gender norms.