

Towards an Integrated Feminist Perspective in Climate Change Solutions

BUILDING RESILIENCE IN THE SOUTH SERIES – POLICY BRIEF

By Yasmine Akrimi – North Africa Research Analyst

INTRODUCTION

Climate change is more than ever the topic of the hour as governments and citizens across the globe are urged to take collective action to halt its impacts. Women, specifically those from low-income communities in the global South, are climate change's first victims. Yet, gender-responsive climate solutions are painfully slow to develop. This paper highlights the different ways gender and ecological poverty are interlinked and the lack of representation of women in climate decision-making. It then makes recommendations for an integrated gender perspective in the fight against climate change.

While ecological engagement has in recent years become attached to the lifestyle of urban, wealthy residents of the global North, and sometimes reduced to consumerist behavioral changes at an individual level – e.g. adopting a vegan/vegetarian diet, waste sorting, and reducing one's carbon footprint – women in the global South and in marginalized communities in the North have long been equating their oppression and the destruction of nature under the same patriarchal capitalist structures. These women were the first ecofeminists, before the movement was mainstreamed and their contribution largely invisibilized. The birth of ecofeminism could be traced back to the Chipko movement in 1970 in India when women were hugging trees to prevent them from being cut down.

The gendered vulnerability of dispossessed communities to climate change in developing countries is supported by facts. More than 85% of the poorest people in the world reside in south Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Income poverty can be linked to two principal components: living in rural areas and in ecologically degraded environments. Around the world, the geography of poverty is similar. What is termed natural capital – generally comprising natural resource stocks, land, and ecosystems – accounts for 47% of the wealth in low-income countries, highlighting the dependence of developing nations on natural resources.

According to various studies by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), one in every seven inhabitants on earth depends on a forest to survive, and most of those dependent upon forests fall below the poverty line. The majority of the poorest communities' livelihood is dependent on natural resources such as forests, land, livestock, or rain. These communities are the first victims of climate change and ecological vulnerability. In simpler terms, the closer one is to natural resources the higher the chances to be poor. What is termed poverty is arguably ecological poverty.

CLIMATE CHANGE IS NOT GENDER-NEUTRAL

Until present day, the dominant narrative on climate change has not accurately depicted the gendered character of (over)consumption. A now-famous symbol of the climate change burden carried by the global South, and the climate debt owed by the global North's over-consumers, an overweight Justitia, the western Goddess of Justice, rides on the back of a starving African male body.¹ The sculpture was exposed in Copenhagen during the COP15 Climate Change Conference, yet it fails to grasp the reality of who carries the climate change burden. The overweight consumer of an industrialized country is actually carried by a malnourished woman from the global South, considering women produce most of the world's food, while the majority of the world's hungry are women and children.

As climate change increases already-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities, both ecological poverty and vulnerability are principally female. Across the world, an estimated 80% of displaced individuals are women. In the MENA region, that accounts for the largest gender gap globally, the weight of gender-based violence

¹ An artwork of sculptor and activist Jens Galschiot. The sculpture was accompanied by the following inscription: "I'm sitting on the back of a man — he is sinking under the burden — I will do everything to help him — except to step down from his back."

and unpaid domestic and care work aggravates women's vulnerability and overall physical and mental exhaustion. In addition to being responsible for growing food crops to meet their families' daily needs, women remain expected to take care of the young, the sick and the elderly, which results in a double burden and reinforces the patriarchal division of labor. A typical example is female students having to leave school early, or put aside their homework, to help the family's women cope with increasing survival responsibilities due to climate change. Lack of education and loss of economic subsistence continue to push women into the informal sector, specifically domestic work, where they are already overrepresented, and where risks of exploitation and gender-based violence are higher.

In addition, resource scarcity exposes women to higher risks of local conflict, limiting their access to essential services (i.e. sexual and reproductive health care, education, social protection, and gender-based violence response mechanisms) and earning a livelihood. In the MENA region, women constitute almost 50% of the agricultural and fishing labor force but own less than 10% of lands, which means that failing crops and less fish stocks will directly impact their livelihoods, while they also have to put more energy and time into labor.²

Another overshadowed problem is meat and dairy consumption, as confirmed by numerous studies, amongst the latest being a 2019 special report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).³ Eating animals and animal products – the production of which is projected to more than double by 2050 – is described as “tilting the planet's plate of food into the mouths of the world's wealthiest”⁴, at a cost of between 870 million people, who suffer from chronic undernourishment.⁵ Animal farming not only exponentially increases the planet's greenhouse gas emissions, it also reduces the greenhouse gas-absorbing areas of forests through which the planet might restore a balance. Parallels between the increasing obesity of developed nations' over-consumers and developing countries' inhabitants suffering from severe malnourishment are directly linked with animal food consumption, and with the gendered character of hunger. Raising animals for human consumption requires 30% of the earth's surface. In the global

² <https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/feminist-movements-and-climate-justice-in-middle-east-and-north-africa/>

³ <https://www.ipcc.ch/srccl/>

⁴ Gaard, 2015.

⁵ FAO, 2013.

South, women represent 43% of the agricultural labor force, although their production is 20–30% lower than men's because women are prevented from farming the best soils, and denied access to seeds, fertilizers, and equipment.⁶

Around the world, women are responsible for cooking and serving food. When food is insufficient, women tend to eat what is left after feeding men first and children second, leading to nutritional deficiencies. When food is insufficient, women deny themselves food so that children can eat. While an estimated 146 million children in developing countries are underweight due to acute or chronic malnutrition, 60% of the world's hungriest are women.

According to the World Food Program (WFP), if women farmers had the same access to resources as men do, the number of hungry people in the world could be reduced by up to 150 million.⁷ As a constant reminder of the impact of climate change, there is currently more than enough food produced in the world to feed everyone on the planet, yet as many as 828 million people remain undernourished. After considerably declining for a decade, the number of hungry people grew by as many as 150 million between 2019 and 2022, a crisis caused principally by conflict, climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸

There is no doubt rapid population growth in impoverished countries exacerbates the vulnerability of women and girls, e.g. in accessing reproductive health as “[i]n low-income regions alone, 214 million women want to avoid pregnancy but are not using any form of modern contraception”.⁹ Yet, when it comes to hunger, the problem is principally one of how food is distributed, and who controls the supply. Additionally, international monetary institutions’ debt repayment programs require developing countries to produce cash crops for export rather than food crops for local consumption to pay off debt, resulting in more debt and more hunger.¹⁰

⁶ WFP, 2013.

⁷ WFP, 2013.

⁸ <https://www.actionagainsthunger.org/the-hunger-crisis/world-hunger-facts/>

⁹ <https://populationconnection.org/resources/population-and-climate/#:~:text=Population%20growth%2C%20along%20with%20increasing,especially%20in%20low%20Dresource%20regions.>

¹⁰ Gaard, 2015.

YET WOMEN ARE MISSING FROM CLIMATE CHANGE SOLUTIONS

According to several studies, while climate protection policy areas – energy policy, transportation planning, urban planning – are male dominated, women form between 60% and 80% of grassroots environmental organization's membership and mobilize at a higher rate for ecological reform projects. Compared to men, women perceive environmental risks as more threatening and worry more about climate change. They also deem climate change impacts to be harsher and tend to question the efficiency of current climate change policies, compared to men who tend to trust the dominant scientific and technical solutions. Overall, societies with greater gender equality will have relatively lower impacts on the environment.¹¹

Indeed, envisaged primarily from the viewpoint of the environmental/climate sciences, climate change has been most frequently discussed as a scientific issue requiring technological and scientific solutions without calling into question neocolonial ideologies and economies of domination and exploitation. These dominant partial analyses of the root causes of climate change contribute to the inefficacy of the global fight against climate change.

International policies aimed at mitigating climate change include reducing net emissions of greenhouse gases through enhanced forest management in developing countries with the REDD+ initiative, the Kyoto Protocol's clean development mechanism¹², sustainable development funding for ecologically vulnerable countries, genetically modified crops and renewable energy technology.¹³ In parallel, consumers of the global North are incited towards climate-responsible consumerism and carbon-footprint reduction. The recent awareness of the need to question consumerism and economic growth is important as it carries within it the ideological transformation needed for a global shift in our relationship with ecosystems.

Yet, at the decision-level, climate change remains desperately gender-blind. This means issues that traditionally mobilize women, as livelihoods, health, and habitats, are marginal within the technical-scientific policies prioritized in climate change

¹¹ Ergas & York, 2012. Data collected from 103 nations from all regions and levels of development.

¹² Allows a country with an emission-reduction or emission-limitation commitment under the Kyoto Protocol to implement an emission-reduction project in developing countries. Such projects can earn saleable certified emission reduction credits, each equivalent to one ton of CO₂, which can be counted towards meeting Kyoto targets.

¹³ Klein, 2012.

action plans and funding. When gender is considered, as in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) “Gender and Climate Change”, it is to highlight women’s “critical role in combatting climate change”. Yet, to perform that “critical role”, gender parity in climate decision-making is a basic requirement that remains unfulfilled. Both men and women need to be equally represented in policymaking on climate change.

THE LOSS AND DAMAGE FUND AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR GENDER MAINSTREAMING

“Loss and damage is a general term used in UN climate negotiations to refer to the consequences of climate change that go beyond what people can adapt to, or when options exist but a community doesn’t have the resources to access or utilize them. Loss and damage is and will continue to harm vulnerable communities the most, making addressing the issue a matter of climate justice.”¹⁴

Since the UNFCCC in 1992, countries of the global South have been pressuring industrialized countries to provide financial assistance to balance their overcontribution to climate change.

A consensus was recently reached at COP 27 through the establishment of a loss and damage fund. Much is left to be done to ensure the fund will have enough resources, be respectful of gender equality, and the needs of marginalized and indigenous communities. Indeed, gender-responsive climate actions remained marginal to climate talks’ decisions. The COP27 summit was set to review the UN’s Gender Action Plan on climate change, part of the Lima Work Program on Gender promoting the integration of gender in climate action and policies. Yet, the agreed text fails to provide adequate funds for the protection and empowerment of girls and women who are at the forefront of the climate fight.

Moreover, it is important to note “no amount of money can recompense those who have suffered the irreparable losses of their territories, cultures and traditions”¹⁵. Yet, the Loss and Damage fund offers the promise for greater climate justice.

¹⁴ <https://www.wri.org/insights/loss-damage-climate-change>

¹⁵ Press release of the International Network for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights <https://www.escr-net.org/news/2022/cop-27-delivers-progress-loss-and-damage-fails-fossil-fuels>

For the loss and damage fund to benefit those who continue to be the most impacted by climate change, it is crucial to fully integrate gender. Women experience considerable losses that cannot be addressed by adaptation or development efforts. As previously demonstrated, climate change impacts women's livelihood, health and safety, among others.

Losses cannot merely be considered in economic terms. The unpaid work of women in families and communities is often disregarded by conventional approaches. Adopting a gender lens hence allows for considering damages that do fit into the supply and demand logic of the global market as knowledge systems and culture. It is crucial then to take into consideration the different capacity needs and coping strategies available to men and women in specific contexts.

Recommendations

To all parties that agreed to the Loss and Damage Fund:

- Establish effective cooperation to ensure the consistency and transparency of data regarding the gendered impacts of climate change. The COP 27 established the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage which refers to gender and gender-segregated data. This gendered approach should be concretized in every step of the design, implementation, and measurement of results associated to climate change in developing countries. Loss and Damage in ecologically vulnerable communities should be consistently assessed, notably through the publication of a Loss and Damage Gap Report.

To all countries, specifically those in the global North with higher capacities to finance the green transition:

- Prioritize and provide sufficient and equitable funding for women-led actions to achieve a just, green transition. In funding climate solutions, assess gender-differentiated vulnerabilities and prioritize the needs of women and other vulnerable groups by taking into consideration the division of labor as well of resources. Consider grants-based, micro-financing, and re-structuring of blended finance to ensure women, women's organizations and enterprises are the direct beneficiaries.
- Continue cooperating with developing countries in building gender-resilience programs, specifically programs that seek to build climate resilience through gender-responsive approaches to supporting rural livelihoods. These programs should range from disaster preparedness efforts, to better forest governance, and coping with droughts. They should be informative and contextualized. More particularly, take into account socio-cultural norms that might limit women from acquiring the information and skills necessary to escape or avoid climate-related catastrophes, i.e. swimming or climbing trees to escape rising water levels or accessing technology.

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Author

Yasmine Akrimi | North Africa Research Analyst



 @BICBrussels  @bicrhr  BIC

 www.bic-rhr.com  info@bic-rhr.com

 Avenue Louise, 89 1050, Brussels, Belgium  Tel: +32 027258466