Gender and Climate Change

Global Climate Justice

Theory and Practice

EDITED BY FAUSTO CORVINO & TIZIANA ANDINA

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Abstract

This book offers philosophical and interdisciplinary insights into global climate justice with a view to climate neutrality by the middle of the twenty-first century. The first section brings together a series of introductory contributions on the state of the climate crisis, covering scientific, historical, diplomatic and philosophical dimensions. The second section focuses on the challenges of justice and responsibility to which the climate crisis exposes and will expose the global community in the coming years: on the one hand, aiming for the ambitious mitigation target of 1.5°C and, on the other hand, securing resources for adaptation and for climate-damage compensation to the most vulnerable. The third section investigates normative aspects of the transition towards a fossil-fuel free society, from the responsibility of oil companies to the gender-differentiated effects of climate change, passing through what is owed to transition losers and the legal protection of future generations.

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15

Gender and Climate Change

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In this chapter, I focus on the negative consequences of climate change for women's rights. This chapter is divided into two parts. In the first part, I point out that poorer women in developing countries are one of the social groups most exposed to the effects of climate change. In the second part, I show why climate change affects women's lives and their rights.

Introduction

Global climate change is a matter in which gender issues intersect with those related to care and social justice. As the European Parliament Resolution of 20 April 2012 reports (Dankelman 2010), the impact of climate change on human beings has gender-differentiated effects. There is evidence that extreme natural phenomena have different consequences on people based on their gender identity. Thus, the impact of climate change on women is not the same as on men. Gender discrimination, much like the intersection between race discrimination and other factors, such as poverty or geography, hinders considerably a person's access to the means and resources they need to face and minimise the effects of climate change on a global level. These effects include natural disasters such as drought, floods and hurricanes. Poverty, along with social, economic and political barriers, make women increasingly unable to cope with the negative impacts of climate change. Thus, environmental crises, which often lead to humanitarian crises, pose a serious question of climate justice. Nevertheless, many governments still ignore the impact of gender inequality and women's socio-economic disadvantages. Hence, the underlying issue of gender inequality remains a critical challenge for ecofeminists to address. In this chapter, I show that women are one of the social groups most exposed to 'climate injustice'. The aim of this chapter is twofold. First, I show that poorer women in developing countries are highly susceptible to climate change. The responsibilities these women assume or are forced to assume during natural disasters render them

more exposed to the effects of climate change. Second, I illustrate why climate change poses such a threat to women's lives and how these changes significantly affect their social, political and economic rights. Climate change affects human rights, and the negative consequences of climate change can be seen as violating fundamental rights of women in particular.

1. Women and the Negative Effects of Climate Injustice

Climate change increases the number and intensity of natural disasters such as tropical cyclones, prolonged dry spells, intense rainfall, heatwaves, tornadoes, thunderstorms, severe dust storms, rising sea levels, deforestation and water and environmental pollution. These ecological disasters have dramatic consequences for human populations. The most serious of these consequences include the risk of disease due to an increasing number of pathogenic microorganisms, malnutrition due to the destruction or failure of crops and the forced migration of both people and animals. Statistically, 'climate refugees' and the victims of natural disasters are more likely to be women and children than men or adults (Alston and Whittenbury 2013). Women – especially heads of households in rural, less-developed countries – are among those whom 'climate injustice' affects most severely. This term relates to the inability of these women to deal with the harmful effects of climate change effectively (Masika 2002; Tuana and Cuomo 2014). Factors such as a person's social status, gender, poverty and access to and control over economic resources affect how much climate change impacts their lives. As many studies show (Neumayer and Plümper 2007; Castañeda and Gammage 2011; Swarup 2011; Atkinson and Bruce 2015), since women in developing countries have reduced economic, political and legal power, they are less able to manage the negative effects of climate disasters. In rural areas, women are particularly vulnerable to climate change because they are highly dependent on local resources for their livelihoods. In these countries, women are predominantly in charge of securing clean drinking water, food and fuel for cooking and heating. Gender inequality increases after events, such as extreme drought, in places where it is the responsibility of women and girls to collect water every day, especially when water resources become scarcer. As Stern (2009, 70) maintains, in drought-affected countries, 'many poor people, but particularly women and girls, will have to spend more time and energy fetching water from further away'.

Several factors explain the differences between women and men in terms of their exposure and vulnerability to risks from climate change. First, gender differences affect a person's ability to access goods and services. Certain markets and institutions limit women's access to credit and labour opportunities. As Cuomo (2011) explains, the global gender gap in earnings and productivity is considerable: women earn only 30–80% of what men earn

each year on average. According to a World Bank survey carried out in 141 countries, 103 countries impose legal restrictions on women that hamper their economic opportunities (Mishra and Mohapatra 2017, 151). The available data from developing countries indicates that more women work in agriculture and basic crop production than men. More than their male counterparts, these women often reinvest their income into the family, too. Even though women represent half of the agricultural workforce, they only own between 10–20% of the land.

Secondly, unlike men, women face significant challenges in influencing any level of policy or decision-making within their communities. Indeed, women are often underrepresented or completely absent from the institutions that make or negotiate decisions regarding how their society might tackle climate change. Unlike men, women in certain rural areas also lack important financial resources. This economic deprivation not only causes income inequality for women but also renders them less capable of contributing towards the policies and programmes that could impact their lives.

Third, socio-cultural norms often limit women's knowledge of the information and skills they need to avoid danger, including the ability to swim or climb trees when escaping rising water levels. Likewise, these same norms often impose dress codes on women that limit their mobility in times of danger, as well as their ability to assist small children who cannot swim or run. Climate problems and environmental disasters also significantly impact women's education, health and migration. Environmental catastrophes reduce education rates considerably: children often drop out of school to help their mothers work in fields, and the strain on resources forces women to work harder to obtain drinking water, food and energy (Stern 2009, 70). Even if these women experience the greatest impacts of environmental disasters, they often lack the information and knowledge needed to act effectively in emergencies. Furthermore, the percentage of illiterate women in the world is much higher than that of men. Since women experience illiteracy at a higher rate on average, they are more likely to lack the information and means of communication to act accordingly in the event of a natural and catastrophic event.

Moreover, social influences make women disproportionately vulnerable to disasters and the negative effects of climate change. During and after extreme weather events, girls face an increased risk of violence and exploitation, including sexual and physical abuse and trafficking (Alston et al. 2014). These risks intensify when women are out collecting food, water and firewood or when disasters force them to stay in temporary shelters. In climate-affected areas, married women in farming families report that their

obligations significantly increase compared to climate-unaffected area. In fact, drought reduces agricultural income and forces many women to seek job opportunities outside the farm (Afridi, Mahajan and Sangwan 2021, 2022). Nevertheless, although some of these women have to travel far away or relocate temporarily for work, most women face care responsibilities within the home, which form a significant barrier to their opportunities for progress. In contrast, their male partners respond to the loss of financial security and livelihoods with increased rates of depression and domestic violence (Alston 2008). Climate change escalates the likelihood of physical distress for women and girls along with other effects, such as decreased opportunities to attend school and increased risk of assault (Stern 2009; United Nations News Centre 2009). Ultimately, then, men and women experience different levels of vulnerability to the consequences of climate change.

Fourth, the lack of gender distinctions in data related to livelihoods, disaster preparedness, environmental protection, health and well-being often leads to this data misrepresenting women's roles and contributions. The result is often a gender-blind climate change policy that does not consider differences in gender roles and norms, such as the fact that women and men have distinct needs, constraints and priorities. In particular, in the cases of forced or voluntary migration induced by climate change, women and men need different provisions regarding health and personal security and protection. In poor countries, droughts and water shortages resulting from climate change force women to work more than men to provide water, food and energy, and young girls frequently abandon school to help their mothers in these tasks. Therefore, such policies might have the unintended effect of increasing women's vulnerability (I am not saying or denying here that climate change policies, which are often gender-blind and do not recognise women's contributions to strategies for changing environmental conditions, do not indirectly affect and damage men, too).

Therefore, it is not surprising to learn that how climate change disproportionately affects women – but also people of colour and the poor – is a matter of feminist concern (Masika 2002; Hemmati and Röhr 2007; Dankelman 2010). Natural disasters affect women in relation to the role they play as producers and procurers of food, caregivers and economic subjects. Climate change, both natural and human-induced, makes poorer women in developing countries even more vulnerable. The responsibilities these women adopt either voluntarily or through necessity during disasters make them defenceless to the effects of such changes. Not only do women consistently face shortages of water and food as a result of climate change, but they also face risks to their health and lives (UNFCCC 2007). Moreover, the high mortality and infectious diseases rates of women in affected areas are precisely due to the fact that they are mainly caregivers.

Contemporary environmental problems influence the lives and status of women (Gaard and Gruen 2005). Thus, the negative effects of climate change, which include water and environmental pollution, are a feminist issue. In particular, eco-feminists have examined how patriarchal, misogynistic, racist and anthropocentric cultures have partaken in eco-destructive forms of development and progress (Griffin 1978; Merchant 1980; Haraway 1990; Warren 1990; Cuomo 1992; Gaard and Gruen 1993; Mies and Shiva 1993; Plumwood 1994; Cuomo 1998). According to these critics, feminists should take the issue of vulnerability and gender inequality seriously in relation to the goals of climate justice. Furthermore, eco-feminists emphasise that their perspectives offer alternatives to eco-destructive cultures. Some eco-feminists even use the slogan 'nature is a feminist issue' to define their environmental philosophy (Warren 2000). The next section examines how climate change disproportionately impacts the rights of people in vulnerable groups and situations, such as women who are experiencing poverty.

2. Climate Justice and Human Rights

As some authors maintain, climate change is a social injustice issue that threatens one's ability to enjoy the full range of their human rights. According to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 'everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person'. Article 1 of the Declaration states that 'all human beings are born equal in dignity and rights'. Additionally, Article 19 asserts that 'everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers'. Consequently, the Declaration maintains that all states should, at the very least, take effective measures against predictable or preventable loss of life. Moreover, these states should respect, protect, promote and fulfil the right to life along with equal access to information and education and liberty to participate in the cultural and economic life of their community.

However, one might wonder how the weather effects of climate change and global warming, such as hurricanes, cyclones, typhoons, drought, floods, rain and snow affect human rights. Moreover, it might be argued that climate is a matter of weather and that the phrase 'weather effects of climate change' is redundant. I might reply that there are effects of climate change that do not manifest themselves as weather phenomena, such as, for example migration, violence and exploitation as negative consequences induced by some effects of climate change. As Lane and McNaught (2009) show, women and children are particularly vulnerable to abuse during times of drought. Also, during

these events and in emergency situations, many young women are forced to labour for cash in local towns or have to take care of their siblings (Swarup 2011). In doing so, they do not attend school or renounce education opportunities, and their exposure to potential abuse and exploitation increases. In addition to weather phenomena, climate change impacts important rights, such as the rights to life, health, food, water and sanitation, adequate housing and, in some communities, the very right to self-determination. Further detrimental impacts include the rights to development, education and meaningful and informed participation in social, cultural and economic spheres. The rights of those most affected by climate change are those of future generations. Human rights and climate justice are therefore interdependent issues.

Everyone should have the right to participate actively, freely and meaningfully in planning and decision-making processes that impact global climate and weather. The participation should also include the right to receive a prior assessment of the consequences of the proposed actions on climate change and human rights. It should similarly include the right to a fair hearing and the right of underrepresented groups to participate in the protection of their land, natural resources, property rights and cultural heritage.

However, many governments deny social groups such as indigenous people and women the right to participate equally and meaningfully in climate change discussions. In particular, climate change intensifies gender inequality and discrimination and adversely affects women's rights. Many countries deny women the right to be informed and to participate in decision-making processes about changes to their physical and natural environments – the very land on which they rely for their health and survival. In many social contexts, governments deny women the right to receive timely, clear, understandable and accessible information without financial burden. Furthermore, these women often lack the right to have, express and disseminate their opinions about climate change issues. In addition, authorities in poor and disaster-affected areas often deny women the right to an education, a climate education and the ability to learn from multiple perspectives.

As highlighted above, women play an important role in managing natural resources along with other productive and reproductive activities within the household and wider community. However, authorities do not always recognise this role, meaning that women are often unable to contribute to livelihood strategies adapted for changing environmental conditions. Many authors argue that society should recognise women's knowledge and skills and then utilise them in strategies for mitigating the catastrophic effects of

climate change (Adger et al. 2013; Leisheret al. 2016; Tanjeela and Rutherford 2018; Wamsler and Brink 2018; Garikipati and Kambhampati 2021). There are good reasons to believe that allowing women to participate meaningfully in these policies would improve the effectiveness and sustainability of climate change projects and programmes. Not only would recognising the role of women have the advantage of addressing existing social inequalities, but it would also satisfy international agreements on the need to address women's equality and empowerment. Therefore, eco-feminists should promote a better understanding of how climate change impacts the human rights of women, namely of how climate change entails the violation of some women's rights or prevents women from fully enjoying them – I should specify that, by women, I mean anyone who identifies as a woman and/or who is perceived or treated as a woman.

Following de Beauvoir (1972), I adopt the practice of using gender as social notion and sex as biological one and the view according to which gender and sex are not necessarily linked. More precisely, a violation of fundamental human 'capabilities' that – following Nussbaum – are essential to a good life - as it is noted, Nussbaum (1995, 85) distinguishes a list of 10 central capabilities, and she maintains that 'a life that lacks any one of these capabilities, no matter what else it has, will fall short of being a good human life'. To achieve this goal, we should further examine the variegated data that focuses specifically on gender and its intersection with other factors, such as age, disability and ethnicity. Gender equality is a fundamental human right. As many authors argue (Denton 2002; Terry 2009; Tuana 2012, 2022), it is imperative that governments promote equality when devising their climate-development policies. In all efforts to reverse or prevent climate change, world governments must centre gender equality along with the full and equal participation of women. I am not saying that men are not indirectly damaged from authorities that do not recognise the importance of women's contributions to livelihood strategies adapted for changing environmental conditions. Rather, I am saying that climate change policies that do not recognise or do not take into account women's contributions from the very beginning amplify inequalities and have a negative impact on gender equality and women's rights.

3. Climate Change and Women Rights

The philosophical issue of women's rights has long concerned feminist scholars. Since the end of the seventeenth century, feminist thinkers have discussed these rights especially in terms of the legal status of women. Two texts are of seminal interest here: Olympe de Gouges's (1791) *The Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen* and Mary

Wollstonecraft's (1792) *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*. John Stuart Mill (1869) also examines the question of women's legal status in *The Subjection of Women*, a text that later became a point of reference for liberal feminist thought. In the latter text, Mill brilliantly and passionately defends the moral, civil and political rights of women. All of the above texts are decidedly current due to their polemical tone and how they openly denounce the subjugation of women. However, only the Vienna Declaration truly attempts to articulate women's rights and formulate an agenda to ensure that women can fully enjoy them.

The representatives of the states present at the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights approved the Vienna Declaration on 25 June 1993. The Declaration proclaims that 'the human rights of women and of the girl-child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights' (Article 18). Furthermore, the Declaration maintains that each signatory must defend 'the full and equal participation of women in political, civil, economic, social and cultural life, at the national, regional and international levels, and the eradication of all forms of discrimination on grounds of sex are priority objectives of the international community'. However, we must now determine how women's rights constitute human rights and why some of them relate only to the female gender. Feminist philosophers have argued that the standard lists of human rights included in treaties and documents is not a sufficient remedy for gendered oppression and dehumanisation (Cudd 2005; Meyers 2016). Men and women face different risks. The lists of human rights do not sufficiently take into account these differences and do not make a prominent place some issues like domestic violence, reproductive choice and trafficking of women and girls for sex work. The lists of human rights have to be expanded 'to include the degradation and violation of women' (Okin 1998; Bunch 2006, 58; Lockwood 2006).

On 10 December 1948, the United Nations General Assembly guaranteed human equality with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, although the 1948 Declaration marked an important first step towards international recognition of human dignity, it proved to be ineffective in protecting the dignity of women. In fact, many interpretations of the Declaration regard the violation of women's rights within the family and at home as a private matter that does not concern states or international organisations. In addition to affirming the principle of non-discrimination between the sexes, the Action Program of the Vienna Declaration specifies, for the first time in the history of international law, that gender-based violence due to culture or religion, harassment or sexual exploitation is detrimental to the dignity and value of the human person. Moreover, the Action Program defines mass violence against women such as ethnic rape, forced pregnancy and sex trafficking as crimes against humanity. According to the 1993 Vienna

Declaration, defending women's rights is therefore an integral part of protecting human rights in general. The Vienna Declaration thus addresses shortcomings in the original 1948 document. In line with the Vienna Declaration, the Program of Action at the Fifth World Conference of Women in Beijing (1995) recognised women's sexual and reproductive freedoms as integral to human rights in general - women's reproductive rights include, for example, the right to abortion, control over reproduction, birth control, freedom from coerced sterilisation, the right to receive education about sexually transmitted infections, menstrual health and protection from practices of genital mutilation (Freedman-Isaacs 1993). I am not denying that also men have the right to sexual and reproductive freedom (Ziegler 2020).

For this reason, it is legitimate to ask which rights count as human rights and which relate specifically to the lives of women. Current debates about which to include among human rights, along with recent controversies over their risk of devaluation due to constant demands and pressures, expanding the list that contains these rights is a difficult task. By definition, human rights are the inalienable rights of person. They include, among others, the right to life, to freedom and security, to freedom of opinion and expression, to a fair trial, to a dignified existence, to religious freedom and to gather in organisations or associations. However, we should distinguish these human rights from civil and political rights. While human rights are universal in their distinction from citizenship or national laws, civil and political rights apply only to the organisations and associations of citizens. Thus, each state's national laws guarantee and govern civil rights. All individuals possess human rights for the simple fact that they belong to the human species. But civil rights depend upon an individual's citizenship within an organized society. Subsequently, when we speak of the rights of women, we generally mean that they are a set of particular human rights. However, one may object that to speak of human rights as particular to a certain group is a contradiction in terms. In fact, human rights are universal and belong to everyone, both women and men. In this way, one might question the legitimacy of reserving a set of human rights to a specific part of the human species.

However, two issues motivate the need to claim women's rights as specific human rights. For political and historical reasons, we cannot separate the need to affirm equality between the sexes from a recognition of their differences. Since the 1990s, the international community has affirmed the need to reread people's fundamental freedoms from a gendered perspective. To ensure the protection of women's rights, it is not enough to condemn sexual discrimination and recognise gender equality between men and women. Rather, we need to radical reconceptualise people's rights in light of sex and gender differences. In this context, though, one need not understand these differences in an essentialist or identitarian sense. On the one hand,

the essentialisation of differences between the sexes and, on the other, the claim that some communities have made for collective cultural liberties has resulted in serious violations of women's rights. A pertinent example of such violations includes the acts of genital mutilation or child marriage that occur within some religious communities. Thanks to the significant work of international organisations since the 1990s, we have begun to reconceptualise universal human rights. Namely, we assert that feminists need not compromise the dignity of women with respect to the cultural or religious beliefs that govern their role in a given society. In this way, we have affirmed a new dimension of personal rights.

One of the aims of the above trend is to place women's rights on a foundation that reconciles cultural and religious specificities with respect for the universal dignity of all women. The rights in question here also include those of ethnic groups and other social minorities. By identifying among human rights those that belong specifically to women, feminists have also questioned the historical trend of using a male model to formulate and elaborate upon individual liberties. It is only through a review of the relationship between equality and gender difference that a defence of universal rights is possible.

As many international institutions and organisations assert, all future policies for preventing natural disasters must guarantee that women have fair participation in planning and implementing decision-making projects (Cuomo 2011; Posner and Weisbach 2010; UNDP 2009; Vanderheiden 2008). In fact, respect for human rights and equal opportunities can greatly enhance policies that aim to develop a sustainable economy and protect the natural environment. Therefore, as some authors maintain, there is a need to consider the issue of gender when devising policies for climate change, development and the fight against poverty. In other words, we need a policy that can address the unique skills that women have developed over the years, such as managing drinking water for domestic and agricultural use. Thus, since climate change concerns, and must be addressed from, areas as diverse as the political-economic to the social and the cultural, the strategies for combatting this global problem must also be attentive to and respectful of gender.

Climate problems intensify gender inequalities and discrimination. In poorer countries, where the effects of climate change are dramatically more evident, the outcomes also negatively affect women's rights. Alongside financing or energy-saving strategies, as well as agricultural policies that respect biodiversity, activists must also raise awareness of a more equitable division of family care and household management. They must also work to protect women and their health by highlighting women's individual needs and rights,

such as those of education. In efforts to combat climate change, eco-feminists can achieve their goal of 'climate justice' only by fighting against poverty and gender inequalities while also campaigning for a reformulation of care work. Furthermore, since the above types of marginalisation exclude particular groups and social categories from enjoying their fundamental rights, feminists assert that human rights require the characteristics of a distinction. Nevertheless, we can still include the protection of women in the broader defence of universal human rights. In this way, one should not understand the task of safeguarding women's rights as something that benefits only women. Rather, as many critics assert, eco-feminism is a political-social fight that is necessary for the progress of all humanity. Feminists have historically outlined the demand for women's rights primarily through the fight for equal access to education and legal equality between spouses. However, this legal claim did not in fact put an end to gender inequality. Therefore, as many theorists argue, the defence of women's rights today requires a complete philosophical redefinition that includes the concept of care (Okin 1998; Nussbaum 2000; Nussbaum 2007). In fact, the issue of care raises important questions regarding social justice, gender inequality and climate change. Since most cultures allocate caring responsibilities primarily to women, it is predominantly women who care for children and families in areas that suffer the harmful effects of climate emergencies, crises and breakdowns. Obviously, this does not mean that women have human rights as caregivers. Rather, women have to be granted specific human rights as women. The fact that, in many countries, they are mainly caregivers due to gendered roles and patriarchal culture is merely de facto.

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This book offers philosophical and interdisciplinary insights into global climate justice with a view to climate neutrality by the middle of the twenty-first century. The first section brings together a series of introductory contributions on the state of the climate crisis, covering scientific, historical, diplomatic and philosophical dimensions. The second section focuses on the challenges of justice and responsibility to which the climate crisis exposes and will expose the global community in the coming years: on the one hand, aiming for the ambitious mitigation target of 1.5°C and, on the other hand, securing resources for adaptation and for climate-damage compensation to the most vulnerable. The third section investigates normative aspects of the transition towards a fossil-fuel free society, from the responsibility of oil companies to the gender-differentiated effects of climate change, passing through what is owed to transition losers and the legal protection of future generations.

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